

MIND MELD III

TV WEEKLY

September
3-9
1966

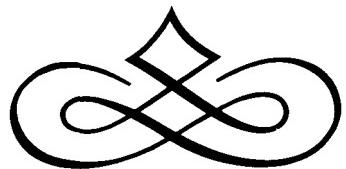
STAR TREK 1966-1986



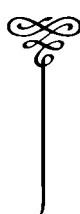
**20 Years Later:
Star Trek Still Going Strong**

See inside stories for details

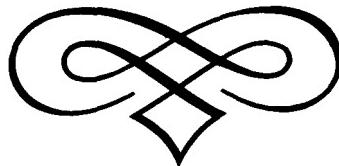
L-R:
De Forest Kelley
William Shatner
and Leonard Nimoy
of Star Trek



"Space, the final frontier.
These are the voyages
of the starship Enterprise
Its five year mission
to explore strange new worlds
to seek out new life and new civilization
to boldly go where
no man has gone before."



MIND MELD III



"To all mankind... may we never find space so vast,
planets so cold, heart and mind so empty that we cannot fill
them with love and warmth."

-- Dagger of the Mind



Editor

Sandy Zier
6656 Aspern Drive
Elkridge, MD 21227



Proofreading: Madeline Zier

Inside Front Cover Calligraphy: Myrtle Mitchell

Front Cover: Caren Parnes



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Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds -- and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of -- wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hovering there,
I've chased the shouting wind along and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air.
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace,
Where never lark, or even eagle, flew;
And while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high, untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

John Gillespie Magee, Jr.



DEDICATION

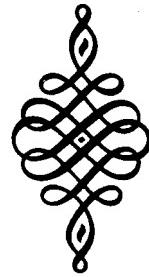
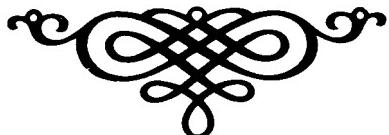
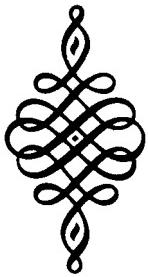
To all those who have given their lives...
... in mankind's efforts...

to boldly go where no man has gone before.



God did not create the planets and stars with the intention that they should dominate man, but that they, like other creatures, should obey and serve him.

--Paracelsus, *Concerning the Nature of Things* (circa 1541)



FROM THE EDITOR...

It's hard to believe that it's been 20 years (well, almost) since Star Trek first aired on television... and now we're anxiously awaiting the release of Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home.

While writing this editorial, I had intended on pointing out things we could remember in conjunction with the 20th anniversary. However, all I could come up with were negatives -- the nuclear disaster in Chernoble, the attack on Libya and, of course, the Challenger explosion. The explosion of the Challenger touched me very deeply... somewhat akin to when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. So, rather than looking back, I'm hoping that the 20th Anniversary year will spark an increased interest in Star Trek, both from those already in fandom as well as develop new blood to keep the fire going for another 20 years... and longer.

I am pleased with this issue... everything from the cover to the art portfolio, which contains some pretty special pieces. This issue, in celebration of Trek's 20th anniversary, contains work set in the series-time frame only and involves our Triad: Kirk, Spock and McCoy. The words cover all facets of Star Trek -- adventure, relationship, humor -- and I am grateful to all my contributors for their support.

I do hope you enjoy **Mind Meld III**. I appreciate all comments I receive and will look forward to hearing from all of you.

So, for now, happy reading. Enjoy!

P.S. Yes, there will be a **Mind Meld IV**, which will continue in the tradition of focusing on the Kirk, Spock, McCoy triad. I'll welcome any submissions for consideration. Publication for **Mind Meld IV** is tentatively planned for May, 1987.



THANKS TO...

Pat Rosetti: for allowing me to use the computer to help produce a high-quality, nice-looking zine.

Ginna LaCroix: for being supportive, and for your encouragement (also, thanx for the picture -- how do you like how it came out?)

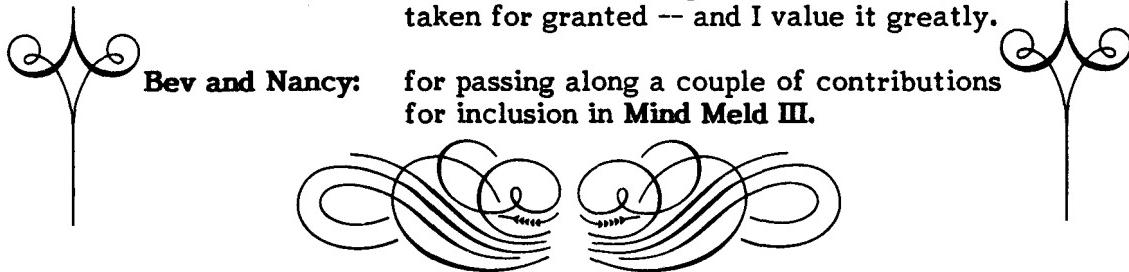
Caren Parnes: for the wonderful cover!

Debbie: (at Photo Offset) for taking such good care of the artwork and making sure good quality negatives are produced.

My brother: for insight and suggestions.

Ann: for being a constant source of support and encouragement (not to mention lending me your daughter whenever I want!). Yours is a friendship that could easily be taken for granted -- and I value it greatly.

Bev and Nancy: for passing along a couple of contributions for inclusion in *Mind Meld III*.



*"May the Great Bird of the galaxy
bless your planet."*

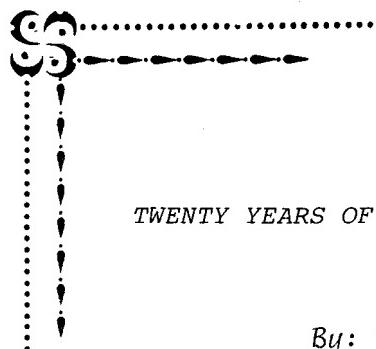
-- *The Man Trap*



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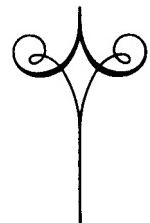
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TWENTY YEARS OF LOVE

By: Terri Sylvester

T wenty years ago we welcomed to our
W orld a gallant crew and their ship called
E nterprise. We followed their adventures
N ever dreaming just how important
T heir voyages would become to us.
Y earning for the stars, we watched as



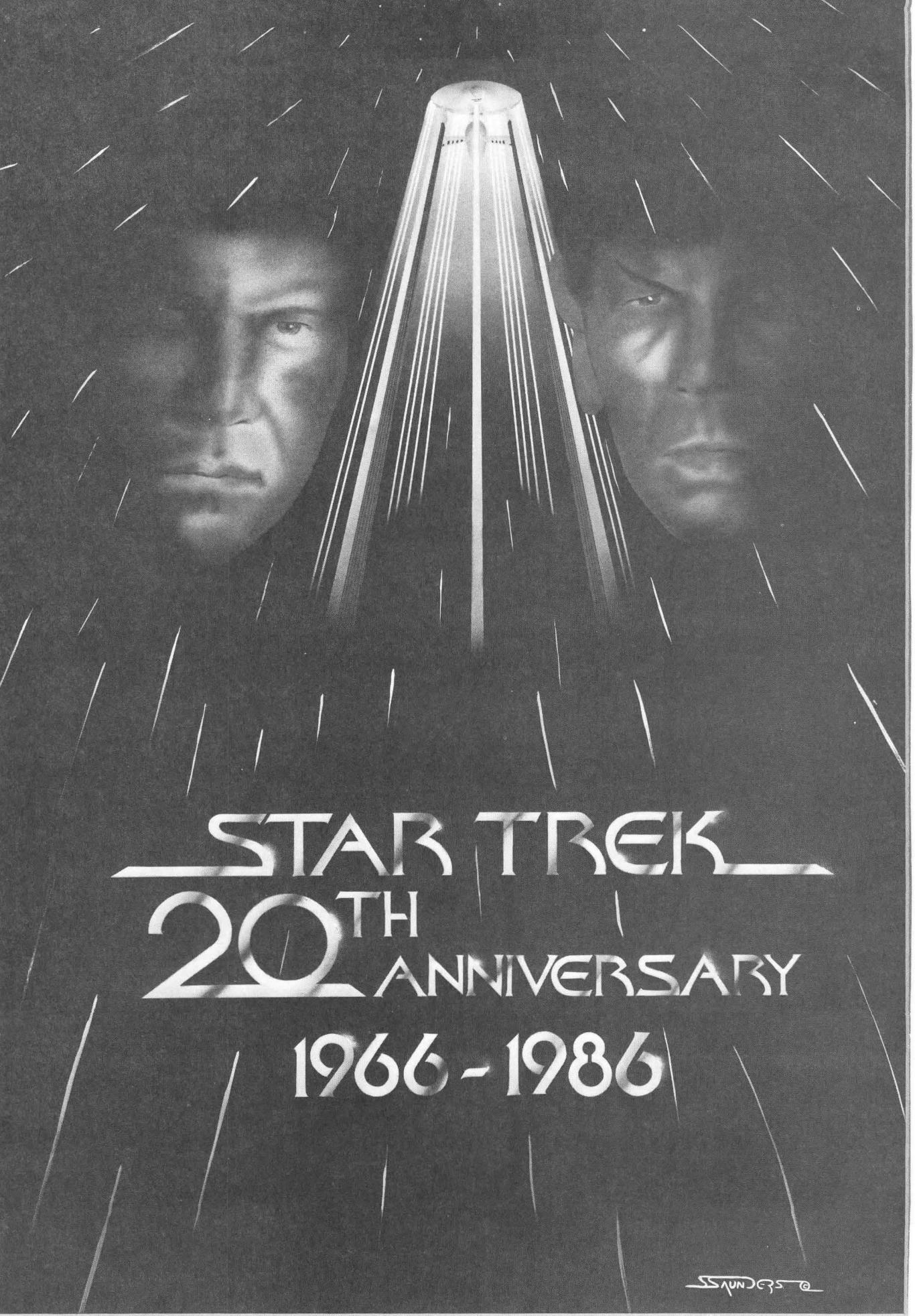
Y ear by year the Silver Lady called
E nterprise sailed across the universe.
A board her crews' reality became our
R eality and her silver walls our
S econd home among the stars.

O ver the passage of time our feelings of
F riendship changed, turning into

L ove for those she sheltered. So sail
O n thru the future years, our
V aliant friends, in the Silver Lady called
E nterprise. May the wind be ever at your back.

Art: Steve Saunders

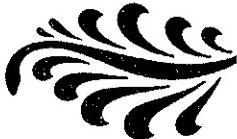




MEDUSAN



NIGHTMARE



By: Julia Lange Arch

Art: Cami Forsell

Mr. Spock stood at the Transporter console, eyes encased in the dark red safety visor which allowed him to view the Medusan Ambassador without ill-effects. He extended his right hand in the Vulcan salute toward the woman who stood before him.

"Live Long and Prosper, Miranda," and, glancing toward the case already in position on the platform, "Ambassador."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock -- from both of us," Miranda responded warmly, her hand mirroring his in salute, "And thank you for honoring me with your IDIC. I now understand."

"Yes," Mr. Spock replied, "the beauty of the Universe is in its infinite diversity."

Captain James T. Kirk stood quietly nearby, hands clasped behind his back. As Miranda finished her parting exchange with Mr. Spock, she turned her radiant gaze upon Kirk. He still found it difficult to believe that her beautiful, dark eyes were sightless, the sparkling netting that decorated her gown actually an intricate sensor system.

"Captain...," she began in farewell.

Kirk's face bore a subdued smile as he spoke, "I didn't think you'd even talk to me." When Spock had slipped ever further into the insanity triggered by the unfiltered view of Kollos, the Medusan, Kirk had desperately sought some way to save Spock's life. Kirk's verbal confrontation with Miranda had been brutal, as he had tried to force her to engage her Vulcan-trained abilities on Spock's behalf.

"Why? you helped me see the truth, to see myself. I am now one with Kollos," Miranda replied.

"I have something for you, Miranda." Kirk brought forth a red rosebud from behind his back.

Miranda extended her hand to take it. "I suppose it has thorns?" she commented ruefully.

"I never met a rose that didn't," Kirk replied, his hand lingering briefly on hers.

Miranda stepped to the Transporter platform and took her place next to the case containing the Medusan Ambassador. She smiled with understanding as she gently touched the Captain's gift and sniffed its sweet fragrance. A brief, wistful smile flickered across Kirk's face. Spock made final adjustments to the Transporter controls and initiated energization. Kirk straightened; his braced shoulders showed thoughts returning to the Enterprise and command concerns, even as his eyes still lingered on the Transporter platform.

Suddenly, Kirk's handsome face convulsed with an expression of agony. A strangled scream ripped through clenched teeth. Kirk clutched at his unshielded eyes, vainly trying to block them from the overwhelming horror of the Medusan appearing before him for one brief instant before disappearing from sight.



Spock moved quickly but cautiously from the control panel to aid his Captain. He had opposed his Captain a few times in the past and it had never been easy, even given the Vulcan's superior strength and unique combat techniques. Now, affected by the horror he had seen, Kirk was beyond the bounds of reason or self-control. However, Spock knew the dire consequences which awaited Kirk if he was not restrained and pulled back from this abyss of madness into which he was tumbling.

Kirk spun around and flew at his First Officer in an insane frenzy, his face twisted in a fearful grimace. Spock reached for Kirk's shoulder and the grip of the Vulcan nerve pinch as he tried to communicate with his commander and friend.

"Captain... Jim... let me assist you to sickbay. You are in pain and in need of medical attention."

But Kirk no longer recognized Spock as his trusted First Officer. In the blur of his reality-distorted vision, Spock's familiar features melted and flowed into a fearsome ghoul reaching out with mangled claws to clutch and tear at him. His ears were flooded with the thunder of his pounding heart. He did not hear the calm, unemotional persuasion of his Vulcan officer's logic. Kirk threw himself against Spock with a power that caught Spock unprepared. As Spock recovered his balance from the impact, Kirk dove behind the control console. Spock followed and with Kirk cornered, he was able to grasp Kirk's shoulder. Kirk slumped into unconsciousness beneath the pressure of Spock's slender fingers.



"Nurse; I need another vial of Somnolant 15, and be quick about it!"

Doctor McCoy's brusqueness was usually good-humored. However, today there was a touch of bitterness in his voice. It was not surprising. He shared the historical animosity of physicians toward the ailment-adversary which refused to surrender to the advanced arsenal of medical science.

Much as he railed against the technology of his century, he hated to admit that none of the extensive techniques available to his profession were able to heal this patient -- James T. Kirk. Thus, he labored over the struggling form of his Captain. As time passed and there was no improvement in the Captain's condition, McCoy could sense the aura of impending catastrophe mount, not only in sickbay, but throughout the entire ship.

McCoy found it extremely difficult to fathom how Fate could inflict this malady on the Command crew of the Enterprise, not just once, but twice. Both Mr. Spock and the Captain were professionals -- seasoned veterans in dealing with the dangers of alien contact. How could they both be so careless as to expose themselves to the unbearable sight of the hideous Medusan? After all, the outcome of such exposure was made quite clear to any Starfleet personnel assigned duty in the Medusan sector.

McCoy recalled that Miranda had been present with the Medusan on both occasions. Coincidence?, he pondered. Perhaps -- still, she had been jealous of Spock... she was telepathic...

McCoy was disturbed by the direction his thoughts were taking. He remembered that Miranda had become secure in her rapport with the Ambassador by the time they

had departed the ship. Surely, the jealousy motive wouldn't explain what had happened to the Captain...

To hell with it, McCoy dismissed his speculation. He suspected that if Kirk survived this potentially lethal lapse, Starfleet would require some extensive explanations from the Captain of the Enterprise. However, that will be a moot point, if I can't solve our more immediate problem, Jim, McCoy thought morosely.

"Daniels, where are the results of the latest psychosonogram analysis?" McCoy demanded, as he watched Nurse Chapel inject Kirk with the sedative he had just ordered. Technician Daniels' expression reinforced McCoy's grim expectations as the doctor accepted the readout Daniels slowly handed him. McCoy heard the whoosh of the sickbay doors behind him as he quickly scanned the graph before him.

McCoy knew who had arrived without even looking up. "I'll be with you in a minute, Spock."

"I did not realize you had such well-developed peripheral vision, Doctor," Spock stated in his standard impassive voice.

"I've been expecting you, Spock. In fact, I was about to call you down." McCoy was quiet, trying unsuccessfully to rub away the dark, puffy circles rimming his eyes and shrug the fatigue from his hunched shoulders. McCoy handed Spock the readout, checked the monitors on the wall above Kirk's head and then gave Kirk a precise but gentle hands-on inspection in the manner of his physician ancestors.

"It doesn't look good, Spock," McCoy continued as he rearranged the tray of instruments by the examination table. "You know the usual prognosis for humans exposed to the sight of a Medusan -- incurable and often fatal insanity."

"Yes, I am well aware of the ramifications of the situation, Dr. McCoy," Spock replied. The deepening slant of his Vulcan brow reminded McCoy that, of course, Spock understood. After all, he'd had recent personal experience with the condition. McCoy hastened to be more specific.

"It is important to remember that Jim is not a Vulcan, Spock, and the circumstances are not identical to those you experienced. Even as a Human, Jim has several personal characteristics working in his favor. He has a very adaptable yet stable psychic structure and a strength of will that has pulled him through many tight spots before. Theoretically, there are several possible treatments that may yield some positive results. Still, much as I hate to admit it, I think our best bet is a Vulcan mind-meld. The time factor is increasingly critical. The longer we wait, the more problematical our success factor."

"Indeed," Spock interjected, "I compute a ratio of..."

"Spare me the statistics," McCoy interrupted to forestall the inevitable mathematical statement of Spock's precise mental calculations.

Ignoring McCoy's interruption, Spock continued. "I am not a trained psychomedic, Doctor. The mind-meld allows me a convenient entry point to a person's mind. However, that doesn't mean I will be able to ameliorate the Captain's Medusan-induced paranoia. He may react as violently and irrationally as he did when I tried to moderate the adverse mental effects in the Transporter room."

"I realize that, Spock, but I can't see where he'll be any worse off than he is now."

"Very well, Doctor."

"Nurse Chapel, please bring me the neural-animator. We will need to partially inhibit the sedative's effect to allow Spock access to the source of the trauma. We'll have to count on the physical restraints to provide adequate control while Spock makes contact. And stand by in case we need further assistance."

"Of course, Doctor -- but do you really think it wise for Mr. Spock to attempt a Vulcan mind-meld at this time? After all, he's only recently recovered from the Medusan effect himself."

"I am well aware of that, Nurse!" McCoy snapped back, then immediately added, "I'm sorry, Christine; I know there is an element of risk. But with that tough Vulcan constitution of his, Spock has a resilience that would put a clutch of Hortas to shame."

McCoy observed while Spock prepared to start the meld. He thought he saw a slight change occur in Spock's bearing, a faintly perceptible tensing of shoulder and back muscles. It was the only sign that Spock had any doubts about the trial he was about to undergo on behalf of James T. Kirk.

The prostrate form which lay before Spock bore only faint resemblance to the handsome, dynamic individual who was Captain of the Enterprise. Kirk's body was limp under the effects of the heavy sedation McCoy had been forced to administer after Kirk had repeatedly broken free from the control of milder inhibitors. Even under sedation, McCoy observed that Kirk's body twitched and his face would spasm in pain as the shards of the Medusan nightmare stabbed at his mind.

As Spock stepped forward and touched Kirk's temples with spread fingers, McCoy activated the animator to bring Kirk to a lighter level of sedation.

Kirk's body tensed and a look of primordial fear flashed across his face as the grip of the powerful sedative eased. Spock quickly began to probe Kirk's mind. He was immediately assaulted by thoughts running wild in a jungle of uncontrolled emotions. Paranoia had jumbled Kirk's mind like an angry child hurtling through a house of cards. The usual ordered, refined control and acute sensitivities were shredded and scattered. Yet in the midst of this chaos, Spock could still sense a portion of Kirk's personal power struggling to reconstruct his own sanity. And so Spock searched and probed, striving mightily to join with that still sane core of Kirk's being.

Kirk reacted to Spock's presence like a wild animal at bay, trapped by its predator in a blind canyon. His mind hid behind the boulders of his mental defenses. When Spock continued forward un thwarted, Kirk's mind hurtled forward in a ferocious attack of final desperation. Spock fought back but his own sanity set limits upon his function. He wished to save Kirk, not destroy him. Kirk, on the other hand, was unfettered by such considerations. In the confusion and distortion of his perceptions, Kirk could not see that the aggressor was his friend. Instead, the clear reality of Spock's presence gave Kirk a focal point upon which to vent all the terror and horror of his traumatized mind. Spock strove to calm the building storm of aggression.

Standing vigil outside the battleground of Kirk's mind, Dr. McCoy and Nurse Chapel saw Spock's body go rigid and his Vulcan features cloud and take on an unnatural,

haunted expression. Spock verbalized his telepathic communication with Kirk. His voice came out in a hoarse rasp through lips stretched taut in the suddenly pallid face. "I am Spock, Science Officer of the Starship Enterprise. You are James T. Kirk, Captain of the Enterprise. I do not wish to harm you. Your mind has been disoriented by your accident. I wish to assist you in recovering your internal equilibrium. You are experiencing an aberration of perception. If you will drop your defenses and allow the temporary imposition of my..."

Spock stopped mid-sentence. His body trembled, and his face took on a glazed expression. Then, as McCoy watched in shocked horror, Spock's composed Vulcan visage began to dissolve. In its place there formed an image mirroring the same lines of haggard agony and blazing anger that twisted Kirk's handsome features -- until the two were almost as one. Apparently, Spock's control of the mind-meld had slipped and he was in imminent danger of being sucked into an irreversible fusion with Kirk's demented persona.

McCoy shook himself out of the momentary stupor which had immobilized him and moved to help Spock break the link. "Nurse! Reverse the animator and prepare to administer another injection. I may need help to defuse the Captain's concentration and pull Spock free."

As Kirk rapidly relaxed into a deeper state of sedation under Chapel's hurried but competent ministrations, McCoy yanked Spock's arms away from physical connection with the Captain and spun him around. The sickbay echoed with the resounding whack! of McCoy's determined slap across the Vulcan's face. Nurse Chapel winced but her silent tension eased somewhat as Spock regained his usual Vulcan composure and blocked the second swing McCoy was commencing to aim at his jaw.

"That is quite sufficient, Doctor. You need not continue any further with the practice of your peculiar medical techniques. I find them crude at best." Spock's tone was quite level, but even by Vulcan standards his coloration was decidedly "off".

"Why, you ungrateful son of Satan!" McCoy grumped. "If it weren't for me... , " McCoy paused, inhaled deeply, and released a slow sigh of relief. He broke into a broad grin as Spock stared back at him with his Vulcan features set in his signature expression of single raised eyebrow.

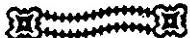
For an instant, they shared a silent moment of comaraderie. However, they were both quickly drawn back to the problem at hand as McCoy queried Spock about what had just occurred.

"The Captain's mind distorts all my overtures into Life Force confrontations. He apparently does not believe or recognize me." Spock's statement was delivered in his usual self-possessed, logical manner.

"I'm sorry, Spock. I shouldn't have allowed you to attempt the mind-meld; it's just too risky. I guess I let my personal feelings get the better of my professional judgment."

"That does seem to be a prevalent propensity of yours, Doctor." Spock raised his hand to block McCoy's incipient protest. "However, the link was my decision, Doctor, not yours. Now, I must return to the Bridge and report to Starfleet Command." As Spock strode to the sickbay doors, he cast a final glance at his comatose Captain. "Do what you can for him -- Leonard."

McCoy nodded tiredly as the closing doors hid Spock from view and he returned to monitoring his patient. He was apparently too preoccupied to notice Spock's unusual slip in using his given name.



Mr. Spock's fingers played across the computer console with his customary restrained yet consummate skill. Despite long hours spent in concentrated experimentation and analysis, searching for an acceptable solution to the Captain's affliction, his inviable Vulcan constitution showed no obvious sign of strain. As the computer acknowledged Spock's latest instruction and began to run the requested multilevel analysis, Spock arose from his preferred position at the Bridge's main computer console to make the requisite periodic check of Ship's status.

Taking a seat in the command chair, he flicked an intercom button and addressed Engineering Control. "Mr. Scott, has there been a fluctuation of .3548 in the Warp Drive thrust?"

"Aye, Mr. Spock. I have it monitored on the auxiliary accelerometer and I can find no defect in the instrumentation. I canna figure what's causing it. It is nay a problem in my engines, sir. They are purring as sweet as a Canisian cibbet."

"Very well, Mr. Scott. I must then logically conclude that the fault is due to operator-malfunction. Please review the current watch and make any personnel adjustments you deem necessary to rectify the situation."

"Aye. I've already talked with two of my technicians. Mr. Spock, the entire crew is as jumpy as a tribble trapped on a Klingon cruiser. We'll be havin' more trouble if things aren't settled soon -- if you gather my meanin'."

"Indeed, Mr. Scott. I acknowledge your concern and am aware of the current distractions to the ship's complement. Nonetheless, operations of the Enterprise cannot be allowed to stray below the base level of efficiency. Below that minimum, all aboard are at significant risk to suffer the most dire consequences. Nor can Starfleet afford to lose a Constitution Class cruiser."

"Aye, you're right enough there, Mr. Spock, on both counts. I'd best be back to my monitors, sir."

"Carry on, Mr. Scott."

As he finished consulting Mr. Scott, Spock turned to Uhura at Communications. "Lieutenant Uhura, have you finished polling department heads as per my request?"

"Yes, sir. Almost all departments have reported some evidence of lapses in crew proficiency. However, as you can see, sir," she paused, handing him the compiled data, "the proficiency quotient is still within adequate norms."

"Yes, the aberrations are as yet not statistically significant." Spock returned the data board to Uhura with a perfunctory, "Thank you, Lieutenant."

Disregarding the obvious dismissal, Uhura continued to stand by the command chair. She realized from past experience that Spock shared her present concern for the

Captain, so she tried not to resent the Vulcan's seemingly callous, "business-as-usual" attitude.

Still, the desire to voice her fears and frustrations was strong. He dark eyes had eagerly scanned the Vulcan's face when she had first delivered the requested proficiency reports, hoping to find some trace of reassurance in Spock's stoic features. However, her unspoken appeal had gone unanswered.

Now, she felt a growing compulsion to verbalize her concerns. She knew the rest of the crew was also feeling the strain and she couldn't help but feel that Spock's phlegmatic manner was doing little to quell everyone's growing sense of foreboding. McCoy had supplied no updates on the Captain's condition in hours. And if Spock had made any progress in his research, he had not been forth-coming in revealing it.

Something's gotta give -- and soon! If nobody else is going to say it, I guess I'll have to!, Uhura decided.

However, before she could speak, her attention was drawn back to her board by a flashing light. Quickly returning to her post, her eyes narrowed as her face took on its characteristic expression of concentration and her hand moved to hold her aural pickup more securely in her ear. Almost simultaneously, she reported an incoming communication. "Starfleet Command on Subspace Channel B, sir -- Staff Adjudant Admiral Simpson -- "

"On Main Screen, if you please, Lieutenant."

The Admiral came right to the point. "Mr. Spock we have studied the viable alternatives for handling your situation very carefully and have reached a decision. You are to proceed at flank speed to Phrenia Institute on Cygnus Minor where preparations are already underway to accomodate Captain Kirk for the duration of any and all necesssry treatment procedures. You are to retain interim command of the Enterprise until a final decision is made on the matter of Kirk's replacement."

The Admiral raised his hand to forestall any comment as he continued. "Mr. Spock, we are well aware of Dr. McCoy's medical expertise, as well as the Enterprise's remarkable record for adapting systems and personnel in a crisis. We considered your preliminary report and accompanying recommendations at great length in our deliberations. Starfleet cannot afford to have a Starship out of commission because of its commander's incapacity. Nor can we allow the Enterprise's vaunted efficiency to be jeopardized by the crew's uncertainty and rising stress in the face of a violent disruption of Command Crew status. With the Potemkin's latest reports on the Romulan incursions along the Neutral Zone, we particularly need all Starships on line and battle-ready.

"We do not question your competency in your current dual capacity of Science Officer and temporary Commander of the Enterprise. But a Starship operates most effectively with its roster at full-strength and the specialized duties of the Bridge crew handled individually.

"Upon completion of Kirk's transport, the Enterprise is to report to Starbase 4 for a modified roster of Command personnel. I trust there are no questions, Mr. Spock."

"You have made Starfleet's position quite clear, Admiral. However, sir, I wish to state my official objections."

"Commander, as I have already stated, your opinion has been noted and logged." The icy, sharp-lined visage that stared out from the main viewing screen melted slightly, "Spock, Captain Kirk's Starfleet record speaks most eloquently for his inestimable value as a Starship Commander. Starfleet has a great deal invested in Jim Kirk; we regret losing his exceptional talents.

"Indeed, our decision was heavily weighted by our concern for his welfare. It is possible that in time, with the advanced psycho-medical techniques being developed at Phrenia, he may eventually be brought back to active duty as an effective, functioning Starfleet officer. In any case, he will be well cared for, as is only proper.

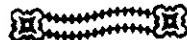
"I know how the crew must feel; the loyalty Jim Kirk has inspired in the Enterprise crew is legendary. Please extend my sincere sympathies and regrets to your fellow Command officers and the entire Enterprise crew."

The Admiral's image faded from view and the starfield that lay outside the Enterprise's hull returned to the screen. Spock remained quietly seated in the center seat, no discernible reaction to be read in his calm, self-possessed demeanor. But he was like the eye of a hurricane. A stormy turmoil of human emotion roiled about him from Terrans who did not share his Vulcan reserve. Incredulity was quickly transforming into anger. Chekov and Sulu both turned sharply from the forward screen and began to voice their objections and their outrage. Uhura pulled her receiver from her ear in obvious disgust and added a few choice phrases of her own to the growing din on the bridge.

With the exception of Mr. Spock, who refrained from any verbalization, everyone seemed to be in general agreement with Mr. Chekov's explosive opinion. "That cold-blooded Cossack! He wants us to toss the Captain out like some third-level maintenance droid!"

Mr. Spock allowed Chekov's statement to go momentarily unchallenged. Spock had been serving with Humans long enough to recognize their periodic need to release some of their pent-up tension -- even if he did not share that weakness himself. The Admiral had merely provided a convenient target. But discipline was necessary to the ship's safe function. So, after a brief period of benign neglect, Spock brought the Bridge members back to reality and their duties.

"Ensign Chekov, Mr. Sulu, prepare to implement Admiral Simpson's directive. Plot a course for Cygnus Minor, Warp Factor 6. In response to Chekov's silent but scathing look, Mr. Spock quietly added, "You have your orders, as I have mine. Feelings cannot be allowed to interfere with the logical performance of our sworn duties."



McCoy sat slumped over the already-forgotten coffee mug cupped in his hands, grim despair in every line of his leadened body. Since Spock's failure with the mind-meld, McCoy had reverted to the more orthodox procedures prescribed for such cases. However, despite the determined ministrations of his physician friend, Kirk was not responding and his body was showing the ravages of the conflict that waged within.

The Captain of the Enterprise normally radiated an unmistakable aura of confidence, controlled power, and often irresistible charm. Now, beneath the unnatural pallor of his skin, his entire body showed the stress of repeated assaults upon his psyche. Arms and legs struggling futilely against the restraints, his body writhed in a hopeless

effort to escape the demons that haunted him. His face was stretched frighteningly taut, except where the lines of pain slashed its surface.

There were still moments when Kirk's immense force of will would regain temporary control. His expressive hazel eyes would clear and seek out McCoy, struggling to express his need and gather his forces against the implacable foe. But then the fear and horror would again swamp his features and the essence that was James T. Kirk would lose its grip on the ledge of reality and slip back into the murky depths of his affliction.

McCoy was profoundly aware of the precious uniqueness of the man who lay helpless on the diagnostic couch before him. Thus, these transitory moments of contact sliced through McCoy's being like the precise incision of a finely honed scalpel of centuries past, laying him open and vulnerable to the infection of despair when the contact was yet again lost. And Dr. McCoy could see his friend steadily weakening.

McCoy abruptly pushed back his chair and strode resolutely to the Intercom on the opposite wall. He slammed his fist on the call button, "McCoy to Bridge."

"Uhura, here, Doctor. How is the Captain?", she added tensely, her ebony features showing the look of deep concern which since the accident had become almost as habitual for the entire crew as the standard-issued Starfleet uniform. The Enterprise crew was used to living on the edge of the unexpected and the alarming. They were all professionals trained to deal with the innumerable variables of an extended deep space voyage. But they were also a complex society held together by the bonds of mutual respect and sense of shared mission and by their common loyalty and profound trust in their particular Commanding Officer, James T. Kirk.

The Enterprise was not merely any space vessel. She was one of the elite of the United Federation of Planets' Starfleet. And the man who was granted command of such a Starship numbered among a most special few in an entire galaxy of sentient beings.

"I'm afraid there's not much in the way of news since my last update, Uhura. Please ask Spock to come to my office immediately."

Uhura quickly relayed McCoy's request, silently pondering the significance of the urgency apparent in the Doctor's voice.

Spock replied evenly, "Please inform the good doctor that his request has been noted and it will be complied with upon completion of my command duties here."

"I heard that, Spock," McCoy's rising voice becoming increasingly audible to everyone on the Bridge. "Command duties be damned! I need to talk to you, Spock-NOW!"

"Doctor, I will never comprehend why you feel compelled to display such illogical and unproductive belligerence when confronted with..."

McCoy's voice lowered and the strain was evident even over the communicator, "Spock, this cannot wait! I need to talk with you and I don't have time for the pleasure of our usual verbal jousts." McCoy's manner lightened somewhat as with a touch of irony, he added, "Besides, you seem to be the one ignoring the logic of the situation."

Spock did not dare to give McCoy's statement any substance by further comment. He merely said, "Very well, Doctor. I'm proceeding to sickbay. Mr. Sulu, you have the conn."

As Spock moved to the Turbolift doors, he felt the side-long glances of the Bridge crew, speculative gloom shrouding all their faces. Even Sulu's natural lighthearted demeanor was subdued, his acknowledgment of command change more automatic than attentive.



The tall, slender figure in Science Department blue stepped purposefully forward as the sickbay doors whooshed closed behind him. To the casual observer he would have appeared to be as always, the ever-inscrutable Vulcan. Even the majority of his shipmates would have perceived only Spock's Vulcan heritage. His human half was nearly always dominated by the Vulcan way of life which Spock had chosen to follow.

Nevertheless the man that lay helpless before him would have seen the unusual tautness in the set of his shoulders, the faint shadow of reaction that for an instant flickered across Spock's features as he gazed down at his Captain who lay in drug-induced slumber. This Human was his friend -- "T'hyla" -- a brother and more. James Kirk knew Spock as no other being did, loved and accepted him for the unique Human/Vulcan hybrid that Spock was. Kirk's friendship had helped Spock accept that reality, allowed him a subtle outlet for the humanity within him, though Spock was usually loathe to admit it.

Spock's refined hearing picked up the faint clink of a small container on a flat surface and his attention was drawn toward the source -- he realized McCoy was waiting. The faint aura of compassion that had settled upon him while observing his commander seemed to evaporate as he methodically recovered the somber mantle of Vulcan detachment and walked toward the adjacent office and his meeting with Dr. McCoy.

McCoy looked up as he sensed the Vulcan's approach. "Ah Spock. Thanks for coming. Have a seat."

"Thank you, Doctor, I prefer to stand," Spock said as he stopped in front of the desk where McCoy sat hunched over his coffee.

"Suit yourself," McCoy replied with a tired shrug and a twist in his seat, trying to relax tightened muscles. "Spock, we need to do something."

"Indeed, Doctor?," Spock replied, one eyebrow raised in somewhat skeptical inquiry.

"As Chief Medical Officer aboard this vessel, I am apprised of all orders that affect the medical status of any member of the crew, as you well know." McCoy's face flushed angrily and his voice hardened as he continued, "I've seen the latest orders from Starfleet concerning the Captain."

In his usual imperturbable manner, Spock responded, "Then you are aware that Starfleet Command has reached their decision after protracted consultation and analysis of the situation. You must also know of the Phrenia Institute's considerable accomplishments in the research and treatment of mental disorders. The staff there all

have impeccable credentials and extensive experience in the field. Logically, it would seem..."

McCoy interrupted, "Yes, Spock, I know the logical arguments -- Phrenia's position in the field, etc., ETC. -- that's all very well. But are we going to abandon the Captain to some strange shrink in some sterile lab? -- someone to whom Jim is just another case in an overflowing file? He won't know any more about Jim than what he has on his computer printout. And, what are we supposed to do in the meantime? After all, it will take us weeks to get to Phrenia."

Spock nodded, "At our present rate of speed, 3.673 to be exact."

McCoy jumped to his feet, temper flaring, "Spock you battery of microchips! It's James T. Kirk we're talking about -- your friend! -- the man who risked his career and his life to save your green-blooded Vulcan carcass more than once. He didn't consult with Starfleet or shunt you off to some research lab when you were lying on that diagnostic couch just a short time ago!"

Spock's expression was arctic as he responded, "My duties as temporary Commander of the Enterprise are quite specific and my personal relationship with the Captain is not a matter for discussion."

A faint twitch of a lowered eyebrow was the only crack in the Vulcan's frozen mask. But next to Kirk, McCoy was one of the few humans that could comprehend the internal turmoil that Spock revealed through that slip in his self-control. McCoy's expression softened accordingly as he approached Spock and the office door.

His subdued tone revealed his own profound fatigue and depression when he again addressed the Vulcan. "Spock, we have to get through to him before it's too late." Spock followed as McCoy moved toward the man they were discussing. "We don't have weeks; we don't have days! If we don't reach him soon, we'll lose him." His voice constricted and his eyes flooded with the suppressed pain of his own helplessness. He knew that he ought to be able to find some way in his vast medical experience to snap Kirk back to some semblance of reality.

McCoy continued, "Jim is physically very strong and his force of will is phenomenal, but he is awash in a world without references. He is not able to apply his own will to pull himself out of the pit he's in; he can't see which way to go. And if the insanity is left uncontrolled, even his body will succumb. The stress is already beginning to manifest itself in physical deterioration."

Spock turned to inspect the diagnostic screen. A momentary flash of worry and concern clouded Spock's features as he took in at a glance the data showing on the complex scanner. His computer-like brain sorted and collated with rapid precision. The logical conclusion was compelling and grim.

"Yes, Dr. McCoy, I see that time is a decisive variable in the equation," Spock stated dispassionately, again firmly encased in Vulcan composure. He continued, "I am not, as you imply, insensitive to our responsibilities nor have I deemed analysis of the Captain's difficulties the exclusive prerogative of Starfleet Command. However, Doctor, I am at the moment uncertain what procedure would facilitate the desired result. My studies thus far have been inconclusive at best. And it was my understanding that your medical efforts to date have yielded little of a substantive nature toward a positive prognosis. In summary, Doctor, what would you advise?"

McCoy shook his head slowly. "Spock, I'm sorry; it's hard to get past the hurt sometimes and," the corners of his mouth rose slightly in a trace of a wry smile as he conceded, "once in awhile -- rarely, mind you, but once in a while -- my emotions may slightly distort my judgment." Mr. Spock accepted McCoy's concession graciously and refrained from comment.

McCoy continued, "Spock, I've wracked my brain for something -- some way. We both know the depth of Jim's devotion to duty and his sense of responsibility to the Enterprise and its crew. I've tried to get through to him on those grounds, but they just haven't been enough this time."

"So what else is there?," McCoy asked rhetorically, his tone an odd mix of desperation and excitement. "Spock -- there is you!"

Spock raised a quizzical brow and seemed about to reinforce it with a verbalization, but McCoy, anticipating him, said, "Now wait, Spock. Let me finish. We need something to draw Jim's mind outward, to turn his thoughts away from the chaos, back toward the world outside. I think you may be the key, Spock. You are Jim's friend. You are closer to him than anyone else."

Spock interrupted, "Doctor, I will begrudgingly grant you the reasonableness of your statements thus far. But I still perceive no constructive procedure evolving from your remarks."

McCoy quickly retorted, "Well, Mr. Spock, if you'd display some of that renowned Vulcan patience and let me have my say, then maybe you'd see what I'm driving at! Spock, if the Captain were to be made aware of some desperate need in you, that only he could resolve..." McCoy left the rest unsaid. He did not wish to make it more difficult for the Vulcan by further elaboration. McCoy had done what he could as a physician -- and a friend. Now it was up to Spock.



Spock said nothing as he watched McCoy leave the room. As a Vulcan, Spock found it difficult to follow Human thought processes at times -- particularly this Human who so often took such perverse pleasure in displaying rampant illogic. But Spock had no such problem this time; there was only one possible conclusion that McCoy could have intended. Spock's Vulcan aspect resisted the thought, but the logic was relentless. Emotions. McCoy wanted him to throw Jim a lifeline woven of emotion.

Spock quickly considered the idea. Ordinarily, he would have dismissed the suggestion as only another demonstration of the Doctor's perennial preoccupation with Spock's supposed suppression of his Humanity and the emotions that Vulcans had long ago decided were best subdued in favor of unmitigated logic.

However, this was not merely another episode in the never ending McCoy/Spock debates, no simple matter of espousing philosophical differences. The issue was James Kirk's life.

Spock could not calmly stand on principle when Jim Kirk's life was at risk. Despite a very real commitment to Surak's teaching, he could not fail to react to his friend's suffering. Therefore, since he could find no other reasonable alternative, he abruptly concluded that McCoy's idea would have to serve.

Having reached that decision, Spock proceeded to an analysis of the precise method to be utilized. It was a peculiar problem to deal logically with an element whose very nature seemed to elude logical manipulation. Spock had shared others' feelings in his varied experiences with the mind-link. However that was not the same as expressing one's own emotions. Spock was not at all clear what sort of need he should emote nor indeed how.

He tried to transform his observations of human behavior into a more personal experience, to make himself a participant rather than an analyzer. The attempt put a decided strain on Spock's Vulcan mind-set.

In fact, Spock's mind was becoming increasingly unsettled, almost confused. A gnawing sense of helplessness threatened to devour him. He must choose... act quickly... but how?

To be overtly emotional as McCoy had obviously intended was a grievous violation of Spock's Vulcan ideals and his Vulcan soul trembled at the thought of acting in such open defiance of Surak's most basic teachings.

Yet the need to help Kirk pulsed through him with the insistent, angry throb of a raw, open wound. He was driven to admit that this would not be the first time he'd suspended Vulcan principle for James Kirk's sake. Under the influence of Kirk's compelling personality, he had gradually developed a formidable commitment to his Captain. To accommodate this unique friendship, Spock had eventually made certain adjustments to his personal philosophy. He'd even evolved a subtle, almost subliminal form of emotional expression in response to Kirk's charismatic nature and their mutual needs.

Spock did not care to acknowledge the mental gymnastics he'd performed with Logic to reconcile his Vulcan conscience to his changed reality. It was, after all, an uneasy truce at best, reached only after considerable time and painstaking effort. Now, there was no such time and the accepted subtleties would not suffice to loose the grip of Kirk's insanity. Blatant emotionalism must be the weapon. Yet, he still had serious doubts about his ability to wield it. Self-doubts... confusion...

As all this swirled within, Spock's gaze almost irresistably focused in Kirk. Here was a human in whom both warring aspects of Spock's self could find elements to admire and respect. Slowly, silently, Spock began to reach for the contact of the link.

Was it human intuition that guided Spock's hands? Spock was not at all certain. But he sensed at some deep, unacknowledged level that it was time to seek out James Kirk. His mind completed the first level of the meld, the outermost boundaries of each mind brushing tentatively against each other.

Within Spock, a rising need seemed to become both cause and effect as it spun upward ever faster, blurring Spock's usually crisp perceptions. He had formulated no exact plan. Now, even his purpose was no longer clear. How could he withstand Jim's chaotic mind and bring them both back to reality when he was so uncertain in his own mind?

No! He should be able to sort the data, define the variables and solve the equation. No problem was unsolvable when properly defined. A thousand years of Vulcan logic demanded orderly procedure.



But his human half demanded recognition, as well. He could feel the surge of pain from the lonely years of self-denial, from sensitivity and compassion not allowed open expression.

Spock snapped back to Vulcan mode with a savage mental lurch. "I must not allow that human aspect to conquer. I follow the Vulcan way of life,- that is the way to sanity and satisfaction. Emotions are a treacherous swamp into which Vulcans sink only at the risk of ultimate barbarism!"

The very desperation with which he grasped for the solid ground of logic mocked his effort. He felt the mounting pressure of a host of disturbing sensations. But before he could define those feelings, something more familiar touched his awareness.

Lost in his own internal turmoil, Spock had momentarily forgotten that he was linked to another. For an instant, he had ceased to be the active connection and in so doing, left that place open for the other to fill.

At first, Kirk's reaction was very basic; he had to regain a sense of himself from the confused jumble of his mind. His self-awareness grew rapidly with his rising

urgency to get to Spock. "My friend... needs me... must find... way out... help Spock!" Kirk redoubled his efforts to master his own terror and enforce some order upon his mind. His mind reached outward to contact and support his friend.

Under normal circumstances, Spock would not be surprised to feel the vibrancy of Kirk's being accepting and boosting the link. Kirk was by nature an initiator and he had years of experience attuning himself to Spock's perspective. But since the accident, Kirk no longer had control of his own mind. Yet this mental touch which Spock sensed, was growing rapidly and it was possessed of a purpose and a strength that glowed with the true essence of James T. Kirk. This was not the terrified, paranoid creature Spock had battled against just a few days ago -- it was Spock's commander and friend that sanely and gently touched Spock's mind.

Unbidden, Spock's feelings radiated out to Jim and in return, Spock felt concern, understanding, compassion, respect all flowing through the link. Even in the midst of chaos, Jim could not fail to respond to Spock's pain.

In that moment of mutual recognition, they both regained their individual equilibrium. The strength to control that they could not manage to find for themselves alone, they found for the sake of the other. Sensing his friend in jeopardy, Kirk asserted a renewed will to order his mind and quell the internal storm. Spock, having exposed his ultimate vulnerability to reach Kirk, accepted Kirk's support and through the multible bonds of their friendship, shored up the shaken foundation of his psyche.

The mind-link had served its purpose. By mutual consent Spock withdrew his hands and terminated the physical connection. For a moment, each dwelled within their own minds, readjusting and assimilating the experience. Then Kirk collected himself and addressed Spock as Captain to First Officer. His voice was weak but steady, "Ship's status, if you please, Mr. Spock..."



McCoy was pacing anxiously in his office. He had withdrawn to give Spock the privacy he knew would be preferred. But his misgivings were mounting steadily. Spock had needed help breaking free from Jim's insanity the first time. What if Spock couldn't turn Kirk around? He could end up committing them both to Phrenia! He shouldn't have given Spock the idea. He should stop it before it was too late...

Preoccupied with these thoughts, McCoy was slow to realize that the environment of the sickbay had changed. There was the quiet sound of subdued voices emanating from the next room -- Jim and Spock?!

Unable to restrain himself, McCoy leaped to his doorway to confirm his surmise with his own eyes. He saw Spock acknowledge the Captain's apparent order and engage the sickbay intercom.

"Spock to Bridge."

"Lt. Uhura here, Mr.... uh... Captain."

"Mr. Spock' will be quite sufficient, Lieutenant. Please inform Starfleet Command that we are no longer in need of Phrenia's services. And please tell Navigation that the Captain wishes the ship set back on a course to Delta sector and our interrupted mission." Spock paused, looked at Kirk, who smiled and nodded, and then

continued, "Please tell the crew that Captain Kirk's 'vacation' is over." Spock gave Uhura just sufficient time to affirm the orders before he snapped the intercom off and walked back to Kirk's bed.

Kirk's face still bore its quiet smile. His expressive hazel eyes glinted a warm acknowledgment of all that had passed between them even as the heavy lids slowly closed and his body inexorably asserted nature's demand for rest and recuperation.

McCoy sighed with relief all the more profound in reaction to his earlier dispondency. Grinning broadly, McCoy started to speak, then thought better of it. Kirk was already sound asleep. Spock stood motionless by his side. There was no discernible emotion to be read on the Vulcan's lean features and for once the Doctor decided that he should allow that illusion to remain unchallenged.

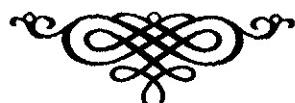
As if reading the Doctor's thoughts -- or perhaps merely aware that McCoy would naturally be waiting there -- Spock turned to him. "I will see that the Captain is not disturbed until you deem it appropriate." Or until Jim revolts, McCoy thought to himself as he listened. "If you need me, Doctor, I shall be in my quarters until beta shift." With that said, Spock departed sickbay, his bearing that of the ever-steady, ever-certain Vulcan -- no doubts, no conflicts apparent.

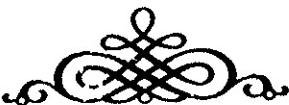
Dr. McCoy yawned and stretched, and checked his patient. Satisfied, he realized that he could finally get some rest himself. He could hardly keep his eyes open now that the thought had occurred. As Chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise, he would have to log a report. But he did not need to know the details of Jim's recovery just yet. For now, it was enough that Ship's Complement was complete again and all was well aboard the Enterprise.



"... the prejudices people feel about each other disappear when they get to know each other."

-- Elaan of Troyius





A MATTER OF AESTHETICS



By: Ginger Dawson

"Absolutely not Doctor."

"Aw come on Spock. Jim had his pointed in the line of duty. Surely you can do no less." McCoy was enjoying this immensely.

"We have managed in the past without the need for cosmetic surgery, Doctor. We shall do so again now." Spock was adamant.

"The entire success of this mission rests on our being accepted as normal citizens down there. With all due respect Spock, those ears of yours can hardly be considered 'normal'. And I doubt they'll buy that 'mechanical-rice-picker' crap." McCoy paused to see if his reasoning was having any effect, then went on good-naturedly.

"Aw come on Spock. I promise it won't hurt a bit."

Spock merely regarded him dubiously.

The sickbay doors swished open and Kirk strolled in with an inquiring, "Well gentlemen, are we about ready to beam down?" By the exchange of glares between science officer and medical officer Kirk had his answer. "No. I see 'we're' not ready to beam down just yet. What's the problem?"

"Our logical, unemotional Vulcan here is either afraid or too vain to have his ears bobbed, even though it may jeopardize the mission." Complained McCoy.

"Captain," Spock, began patiently. "I was merely pointing out to the good doctor that surgery is unnecessary. As in the past a simple head garment such as a woolen cap would suffice."

"In most cases that would be true," Kirk began, "but remember it's the middle of their summer, and the village is along a stretch of beach. You'd look a bit conspicuous I'm afraid in a woolen cap. And nothing else seems to hide those ears. I'm afraid Bones may be right."



A look of alarm flashed fleetingly across the Vulcan's face. McCoy looked smug. "Well Mr. Spock, if you'd please..." He gestured the first officer to lie down on the bed. "This will only take a minute."

"Captain surely..." Spock began pleadingly.

"I'm afraid it's the only logical answer Spock." Kirk said with sympathy remembering a similar situation. On that occasion Kirk had been informed in no uncertain terms that his 'ear-job' did not look aesthetically pleasing on humans. No doubt Spock's would look even less so.

At that moment the sickbay doors swished open again and Lt. Uhura walked in. "Captain here are those false I.D.s you and the others will need for your cover." She was handing them over to the captain when she noticed Spock just sliding onto the bed. "Mr. Spock what happened?" She inquired.

"Oh nothing has happened to him yet." McCoy offered gleefully. "But when I'm through with him he'll look like a new man. At Uhura's puzzled expression Kirk explained. "We need to hide Spock's ears and the old woolen cap routine would still be too conspicuous, so we're having them bobbed."

"Bobbed?!" She repeated disbelievingly.

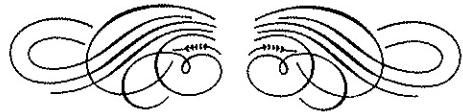
"Nothing else will work." Kirk said defensively. Uhura thought for a moment then offered. "A turban might work. In ancient times in parts of Africa and Asia people wore turbans. Depending on the individual's taste, the ears could be exposed or covered."

At Uhura's words Spock jumped to a sitting position almost receiving a nasty cut from McCoy who had already applied the local anesthetic and was about to begin the surgery. "Dammit Spock! You almost lost an entire ear!"

"A turban, of course!" Spock exclaimed. Continuing Uhura said. "And with your already rather..." she paused, searching for an appropriate descriptive word, ... 'exotic' features, I'm sure, with the proper attire, some plausible cover could be invented for you." Both she and Spock looked expectantly to the captain.

"Well, I guess so." Kirk said. "Spock, you and Uhura see to it. Then let's get this show on the road." Spock almost bounded off the bed. He then turned solemnly to the lieutenant and bowed slightly. "Lt. Uhura, you have my most sincere and grateful gratitude for rescuing me from a fate worse than death." He punctuated the last with a pointed look towards McCoy.

"Go on and get out of here you pointed eared chicken!" McCoy shouted. As Spock and Uhura left McCoy turned to an amused Kirk and grumbled. "Probably wouldn't have looked good on him anyway. After all, I'm a doctor not a miracle worker!"



THE VULCAN

SLEEPING TRANCE

By: Beverly Volker

Captain James Kirk flipped his communicator closed and moved over to stand near McCoy, in preparation for the transporter beam to take them. He threw a tired, resigned look at Tyree and the big blonde man responded in kind. The leader of the hill people was already accepting his grief, already preparing to thrust his followers into what promised to be a long and bloody war. It was not a solution that any peace-minded race would be happy with, and both Tyree and Kirk abhorred what had, of necessity, become their part in it. Kirk could beam away physically, would be able to remove himself and his ship from the war-torn area, but he would not be free of it. His heart and his mind would still be there, remembering what had happened to a place he had once loved. He also knew that he would probably never see his friend, Tyree, alive again. The gentle soul would not survive the atrocities that the future would hold and sadly, Kirk suspected that it might be the best end possible for him.

Just as Kirk moved into position next to his doctor, he saw McCoy's knees buckle and grabbed for him in time to keep him from falling. There was no time to say anything and as Kirk tightened his arms around the thin shoulders, he felt his friend's full weight lean into him.

When the transporter effect was over, the two weary arbitrators had once more materialized on their own ship. McCoy was still leaning on Kirk, his head thrown back against his shoulder. Kirk became aware of a wet, sticky sensation on his hand and saw blood running down the Doctor's arm.

"McCoy's been shot," Kirk was grateful for Scott's presence. "Get a medical team down here at once." The engineer's response was immediate and steady as always.

Shaking his head to clear it, McCoy tried to protest. "'S' all right, Jim. "S just a flesh wound."

"Be still, Doctor," Kirk ordered gently. "And let one of your staff check you out. You're bleeding all over the place."

"Flesh... wounds always do." McCoy's argument lacked strength and it was apparent that he was feeling woozy. Scott moved onto the platform to aide Kirk with his burden.

"Now, enough of that, Doctor. If it were the Captain or our First Officer, you'd insist on gettin' em medical attention right away."

"How is Mister Spock?" Speaking with his Vulcan friend from the planet had not been quite enough assurance for Kirk.

"Oh, he's back to his normal self," the engineer answered, "but more than a wee bit puzzled as we all were - by yere request for firearms."

Kirk was spared replying by the arrival of the medical team and the science officer who had been the object of their discussion. Spock did look much improved from the last time Kirk had seen him and, in fact, seemed in better condition than the two men who had just returned.

"Captain, I heard Mister Scott's request for a medical team to the transporter room. I was concerned at what the emergency might be."

"It's only me," McCoy was still fussing weakly against the attention. "I've brought your captain back to you in one piece."

"Bones was shot by the same kind of weapon that was used on you," Kirk ignored McCoy's barb. "He insists it isn't serious, but he's lost enough blood to make him wobbly."

The medics took over then, lifting McCoy to a stretcher, examining the wound. "We'll take him to sickbay, Captain," one of the young officers told him. "Doctor M'Benga's waiting for him."

As they wheeled McCoy out, he had to have the last word. "Better check out our Captain, too. He might have a head injury and I can't say what kind of long range effect that native-witch medicine might have. Never saw anyone recover from a mugato bite so fast....

When they were gone, Spock turned to Kirk. "A mugato bite? A head injury?"

Kirk wiped a hand over his eyes. "It's a long story, Spock and I'm very tired. I'm afraid our presence here wasn't very beneficial."

"The firearms you requested. An unusual solution for the Federation."

"I know. But the only one under the circumstances. Have they been sent down?"

Spock nodded. "Ship's stores are working on the manufacturing of them now."

Kirk drew a deep breath. "I want to take a shower, and check on McCoy, then I'm going to sleep for at least eight hours... if you think you can handle the ship in that time." He didn't wait for an answer. "Then we're going to take this ship out of here, file our report and go on to our next assignment." There was almost a bitterness in his voice, a sarcasm that was not usually present in his manner. Spock gave him a long look but seemed to know instinctively that it was not the time to voice any comment.

"As you wish, Sir," was all he said.



Kirk managed the first two of his plans with little difficulty. A long hot shower washed away most of the grime of Neural's hills and some of the tension of the last few day's escalating antagonistic relations.

After he was dressed in a clean uniform he went to sickbay. McCoy's flesh wound turned out to be more involved than the Doctor would admit. M'Benga had performed emergency surgery to remove the bullet and repair a chip in the bone. McCoy was mildly sedated when Kirk arrived, so the visit was brief. M'Benga assured the captain that a complete recovery could be anticipated.

The third part of Kirk's plans proved more trouble than the first two. Three hours after he had returned to his quarters, he was still awake. Tossing on his bed, checking his chronometer for the tenth time in as many minutes, the weary man was beginning to suspect that sleep was going to prove an impossibility. His mind kept returning to the planet below and the frightening chain of events in which he had been caught.

A drum was beating... steady rhythm... thump... thump.... thump... The speed was increasing, rising in intensity to a fever pitch... a face swam before him, framed in long, black hair... slender fingers reached for him and they were holding... something moving... pulsing... alive... red blood passed through the root... burning... burning... no... no!... fire and ice... Bones... Bones... You must help... her eyes burned into him... her blood was flame... Mine... You are mine!.... Our blood has passed through the makko root together... he can deny me nothing...

Kirk opened his eyes. He was trembling, bathed in sweat. Breathing deeply, he took in his surroundings. His own cabin. He checked the chronometer; a half hour had passed. He knew he must have drifted off to sleep and with a sense of dread, remembered the dream.

Nona and her magical root. It had indeed contained unknown powers and Kirk wondered if they had been medicinal. He climbed out of bed and crossed to his bathroom, and washed his face with cold water. Feeling slightly refreshed, he returned to his desk and put in a call to the bridge."

"Mister Spock, if there's nothing pressing right now, I'd like to see you in my quarters."

"I shall turn the con over to Engineer Scott and be there in five minutes." Kirk could have bet money on Spock's answer.



Ten minutes later he was trying to explain his quick recovery from a Mugato bite to his Science officer. I know the Kanutu have special ways with herbs and plants and it's legend on Neural that they also possess strange powers. But, is it possible, as Nona claimed, to "belong" to one who cures you in that way?"

Spock considered, "It is impossible to even speculate on such an occurrence without more data, Jim. However, you and I both know that there are mysteries in this

galaxy far beyond our comprehension." He paused. "You did say she seemed to have a certain appeal to you, that in spite of the fact that she was Tyree's wife, you were... drawn to her. Perhaps if you examine that aspect more closely."

It was a painful recollection for Kirk that Spock was suggesting. "McCoy thought I was being influenced by her, manipulated into doing her will. She wanted our phasers. She was much more ambitious than her husband... maybe... maybe I wasn't thinking clearly... maybe there might have been another way to deal with the Klingons and I just didn't see it."

Spock took a deep breath, rose from the chair in which he had been sitting across the desk from Kirk. He walked around Kirk's cabin, seeming to study its contents before turning to answer.

"Captain, I could sense that you've been troubled over your decision ever since returning from Neural. You have confronted Klingons before; you know that reasonable means usually do not work with them."

Kirk seemed not to be listening. "I asked Bones to return with me, after you were shot, because I needed someone who's judgement I could trust. Now, he's been injured, too and my old friend, Tyree will probably..." Kirk paused, running a hand over his eyes. "You're right, of course, Spock. The Klingons would not have listened to peaceful negotiations. They armed the townsfolk and were prepared to take the rest of Neural by force. The only thing the Hill people could do was resist, defend what was theirs, try to keep the whole planet from falling to Klingon rule."

"Not a good solution, but the only one under those circumstances."

Kirk smiled thinly, "Yeah, that was pretty much what I told Bones when he objected."

"The Doctor is not a military man. His job is to save lives. War means people being maimed and killed. That is abhorrent to someone like McCoy." Spock still had not returned to his seat.

"It should be to all of us."

Now, Spock moved closer to Kirk. "If it weren't, Jim, you would not be losing sleep over your decision."

Kirk leaned back in his chair, rubbing his eyes. "If I could only sleep. Maybe things would look better in the morning." He looked up at Spock "I haven't asked how you were. You seem fully recovered. Are you really?"

Spock nodded. "The Vulcan healing trance is quite thorough. Its effects, added to M'Benga's ministrations, were completely beneficial."

"Well, I'm glad of that, at least. Too bad you don't have a Vulcan sleeping trance you could teach me."

"As a matter of fact," Spock offered. "I might be able to be of assistance, if you like."

Somehow, Kirk wasn't surprised, "It would be greatly appreciated, Mister Spock."

Spock folded his hands in front of him and straightened his back. "Very well. You go lie down on your bed while I make a few preparations." When Kirk moved to his sleeping alcove, Spock put in a call to the galley. Then he moved to Kirk's bathroom, rumaging around in the toilet articles there. After a few minutes, he emerged with a small bottle in his hand.

Kirk had stretched out on his bed, by the time Spock arrived. Spock instructed him to remove his shirt and lie on his stomach. That done, the Vulcan poured a small amount of lotion between the palms of his hands, warming it with his body temperature. Expertly he began to knead the knotted muscles of Kirk's neck and shoulders. With sensitive fingers, he plied at the tightened cords, stretching them, relaxing away the tenseness.

Kirk signed, "Mmmm, pretty good. This is a Vulcan technique?"

"Certainly, Captain," Spock continued his ministrations.

"What's that lotion you're using?"

"It is a special blend of Vulcan roots and oils." Spock was informative.

"Nice. Smells a little like my after-shower lotion." Kirk could feel himself relaxing under Spock's deft massaging.

"Perhaps some of the aroma's are similar," the Vulcan suggested.

"Perhaps. You know, the Kanutu use herbs and roots for all kinds of healing. I didn't know the Vulcans were proficient in that art as well."

Spock smiled. "The Vulcans are proficient in many arts. In time, I'm certain you will become aware of a number of them."

"Well, if they're all as therapeutic as this one..." Kirk felt the tensions slip away and with them much of his concern over his decision on Neural. As the gentle hand pressure of Spock's hands on his spine, shoulders and neck continued to drive away the ache in his body, so did the knowledge of his friend's support ease the ache in his soul. He was becoming pleasantly drowsy, lulled by the fragrance of the Vulcan lotion, when he heard his buzzer softly sound.

Spock paused, touching him firmly on the shoulder. "Stay there, it is something I ordered."

At the door, Spock took the tray containing a glass of warm milk and a small decanter of brandy from the yeoman. Before returning to Kirk, he mixed the two together.

"Here. Something for you to drink." Spock brought the glass to Kirk.

The Captain rose to a sitting position. "What is it?"

"A remedy designed to help you sleep."

Kirk took a sip. "Mmmm. Delicious. Like warm milk but something else. A little like cinnamon, yet I can't detect the exact flavor. Must be more of your Vulcan spices, huh?"

"The ingredients have been long known on Vulcan to be conducive to relaxation." Spock hedged.

Kirk downed the rest of the milk. "Well, I've got to commend the Vulcans. They certainly know relaxation techniques. I'm getting so sleepy now."

"Good," Spock approved. "It was the goal we sought."

Kirk sat the empty glass on his bedside table, then slid down, lying comfortably on his back. Spock looked down at him. "I believe you will be able to rest now, Jim. I should return to the bridge."

Kirk smiled. "Sit down a few minutes and relax too, Spock." His voice was beginning to slur drowsily. "Just wanted to tell you... uh... maybe we ought to let the Vulcans handle Neural... They know more about roots and herbs... than the... uh... Kanutu... And their methods are... ummm, more benign and... therapeutic... The root Nona used was... You're right, Spock. She couldn't have had any power over me... it was just a plant... Now you... you know how to use... without manipulation" He could keep his eyes open any longer. Sleep came at last. It would be deep and peaceful and when he awoke Kirk would know he had made the only right decision possible. He would know it because when he wasn't worried about Spock, or an old boyhood friend, or when he wasn't just recovering from a serious poisonous animal attack, Kirk had the kind of confidence in his ability that made him a strong leader.

Spock knew that as he rose to leave. He would not be able to manipulate Kirk and certainly no one would ever suspect that because he was able to apply a few soothing techniques, he had any hold over Kirk. Spock pulled the cover over Kirk lightly resting his hand on the sleeping man's recently healed wound. The Kanutu may have the right idea, but Nona underestimated his Captain. It wasn't a makko root that would heal Jim Kirk. All it took was a friend and a little T.L.C. to make a very effective Vulcan Sleeping Trance...

"The glory of creation is in its infinite diversity."

-- Is There in Truth No Beauty

REVENGE

By: Ginna LaCroix Art: Christine Myers

It wasn't often that Leonard McCoy sought Spock out, but this was one of the times, and his reason was the same as in the past -- concern for James T. Kirk. He found the Vulcan finishing up some work in the science lab and waited in silence until Spock finally acknowledged his presence.

"I can't certify him fit for duty," McCoy said in answer to Spock's raised eyebrow. "Thank god we're due for R&R, and we've already got that vacation mapped out." He walked forward. "Spock, what the hell happened on Elba II? He won't say much about it."

Spock seemed faintly uncomfortable. "I was separated from him a good deal of the time, Doctor. All I can say for sure is that he saw the cruelty of insanity at close hand. He was an innocent pawn in a very sadistic chess game."

McCoy lightly banged his hand on the table. "Take away the restraints of civilization, Spock, and there is no end to the ingenuity of man's cruelty, and for Jim to have taken the full course..."

"You said he was not fit for duty," Spock interrupted.

McCoy glanced up at him. "He's suffering from the effects of phaser stun, his face and body are bruised and swollen from either a fight or a beating..." He shook his head. "Most people wouldn't want to go on duty if they felt like he does physically, and god only knows what he has suffered emotionally..." He drew in a deep breath. "He's hurt, Spock, and he's hurting. It's going to take him a while to get over this one." He took a deep breath. "Stick with him, he needs to let go..." McCoy fell silent as Spock's face lost all expression, and knew he had taken one step too many, treading on ground where Spock felt he didn't belong. "Anyway," he continued, "we should arrive at Star Base 4 tonight, and we can forget all about these pressures for a while." He looked pointedly at Spock. "Jim isn't the only one who needs a break from the Enterprise." He started to move away. "Just wanted to bring you up to date."

McCoy had almost reached the door when Spock's voice stopped him. "I appreciate you coming, Doctor, and shall heed your advice." McCoy turned back to the Vulcan for a moment, then nodded. Whatever their differences, they did have one thing in common -- the friendship and love of one man, and the responsibility that love entailed.



James Kirk leaned back against the wall of the shower and let the sonics beat against his body, almost welcoming the accompanying pain, glad to have something distract him from the nagging memories of Elba II. Once back on the ship he had held up in front of everyone, but too much had happened too fast, and now he needed to retreat.

Garth had been right. That 'rehabilitation' chair was something that he would never forget. Even now the memory of that pain started his phaser-weakened body to shiver almost out of control.

"No!" he said loudly, fighting against the weakness, his fist smashing against the side of the shower stall. The persistent sound of the intercom finally broke through his pain. Pulling himself together, he stepped out of the shower and, out of habit, grabbed for a towel, wrapping it around his waist as he made his way into the main cabin. He hit the audio switch. "Kirk here."

"We have established orbit, Captain," came Uhura's voice.

"Good. Start the shore leave parties, Uhura, and warn Scotty to be ready for the onslaught of overhaul crews."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk steadied himself against the wall. "If I don't see you again, Lieutenant, have a good rest."

"Thank you, sir." After a moment's hesitation, then Uhura continued, "Sir? Take care of yourself..."

Kirk's mouth curved slightly at Uhura's concerned words, but there was only bitterness in the smile. "Thank you," he said softly. "Kirk out." He slowly pushed himself away from the wall. Kirk knew that, for him, time would not pass quickly enough to heal the wounds that lay beneath the surface. He was about to step into the shower again when the door buzzer sounded. With an exasperated sigh, he grabbed the towel as he walked back into the main cabin. "Who is it?" he asked.

"Spock."

Kirk hit the lock. "Come."

The Vulcan walked in, immediately taking in the signs of Kirk's ordeal that stood out so clearly, and the slight trembling of the Human's body, but said nothing. He knew Kirk was not yet ready to talk. "The supply requests, sir, which need your signature."

Kirk took the stylus, but had to put everything down on the desk. His hands were shaking too much to be able to sign without support. "Someday," he said as he handed the signed order back to Spock, "someone is going to come up with an effective antidote to phaser stun and make a fortune. God, I hate feeling like this!" He grabbed the offending hand with his other one, and tried unsuccessfully to hold it still.

The symptoms, although unpleasant, will pass..." Spock started.

"Yeah, I know," Kirk interrupted. "Sorry, I didn't mean to grumble." Kirk looked at him. "You ready yet?"

Spock nodded. "I packed this morning and have already confirmed our reservations."

Kirk moved into the other room and sat down on the bed. "It's been so long, I've even forgotten how to spell R&R."

"It is relatively simple," Spock replied. "You take the eighteenth letter of the Standard alphabet, place the symbol..."

"I was speaking figuratively, Spock," Kirk said with a small smile, not too sure whether the Vulcan was teasing him or taking him literally. "Well, I'd better try taking my shower again."

"Very well," Spock said, "I shall deliver these to Mr. Scott."

Kirk had just adjusted the sonics to his liking when the intercom sounded again. "Shit," he said loudly, "this is a conspiracy!" He was just stepping out of the shower when he heard Spock's voice.

"The Captain is busy at the moment, Lieutenant, is it something I might be able to deal with?"

"Uh, I don't think so, Mr. Spock. It's Admiral Simons."

Spock looked up just in time to see Kirk turn his eyes towards the ceiling. "Captain Kirk will be here in a minute," he said as Kirk grabbed for a uniform shirt. Kirk ran a comb through his hair then, with the towel still wrapped around his waist, he slid into the chair by his desk and activated the viewscreen.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Admiral."

"Perfectly all right, Captain," Admiral Simons said. "I realize you're getting ready for R&R, but..."

You've got to be kidding! Kirk thought, his heart thudding down to his feet. "Uh, sir," he started, "my crew is exhausted, the ship is badly in need of a complete over-haul..."

"Don't jump to conclusions, Captain. At the moment this only concerns you, and possibly your First Officer."

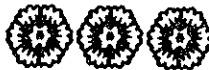
Kirk glanced over at Spock whose mouth momentarily tightened. He had been looking forward to this R&R, knowing how badly Kirk needed to get away from the Enterprise. Even before Elba II, he and McCoy had neatly steered Kirk into renting a cabin at a quiet wilderness retreat. Now, that quiet time was in jeopardy; they could be sidetracked at a time when Kirk was in no condition to take on any additional responsibility.

"Could you both meet me in my office at 1400 hours?" Simons continued.

Kirk forced himself to unclench fists which were hidden in his lap. "Commander Spock has a previous commitment, sir, but I will be there if you feel it's important." From the tone of his voice, Kirk let it be known that he didn't think anything would qualify as being that important.

"Good, I'll be waiting. Simons out."

Kirk sat slumped in silence for a few minutes staring at the now blank viewscreen, then painfully pushed himself to his feet. "Maybe it's nothing," he said softly as he slowly pulled the tunic off over his head, once again revealing part of the damage from Elba II. He stood looking at the shirt for a few moments, and Spock knew Kirk had forgotten he was there. "Damn," Kirk said savagely as he flung the shirt across the room, "who am I kidding?" He looked up to find the Vulcan staring at him. For a moment a look of near defeat showed in the hazel eyes, then they cleared. "Sorry," Kirk continued, "I didn't mean to lose my temper. Guess I'm annoyed at having my shower interrupted so often." The Vulcan's skeptical gaze told Kirk he wasn't very convincing. "Go on, Spock, you have a lot of work to do, and I'm still dirty. I'll catch up with you when I get back from seeing Simons."



Admiral Simons knew from Kirk's bearing and the darkened eyes that he was angry, but wisely refrained from comment. "Thank you for coming, Jim," he said, extending his hand.

Kirk hesitated, then reached out with his own. "You made it difficult to say no, sir."

Simons smiled briefly, then waved Kirk to a chair. "I have a problem and you are one of the few people who might be able to help." He waited until Kirk sat, then leaned forward, his arms resting on his desk. "You've had considerable contact with the Andorian race," he started.

"I don't think I want to hear any more," Kirk said.

"Some time ago, you had dealings with Ambassador Shras..."

"Admiral, on that Babel expedition, I dealt with half of the Federation's ambassadors..."

"And almost lost your life, if I remember correctly," Simons said.

"An experience I'd rather not repeat," Kirk answered softly.

Simons looked at Kirk, sensing there was something other than the Andorians that was bothering him, but finally decided not to pry. "Jim, the Andorians have asked specifically that you be made aware of the situation."

Kirk frowned. It was rare for Andorians to seek help from anyone. He supposed it was an honor of sorts, yet he hated to think what problem would cause them to ask in the first place. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to listen," he said reluctantly.

Simons smiled slightly. "Would a drink help?"

"Am I going to need one?"

"You might," Simons said, the smile disappearing from his face.

Kirk considered the offer, then looked back at Simons. "If you don't mind, Admiral, I'd rather hear this stone cold sober."

"All right." Simons settled back in his chair. "Ambassador Shras has a son of seven preans, that roughly translates to being in his early twenties as we calculate age. He is also somewhat of a rebel, as all of us tend to be as we grow up..." He glanced at Kirk. "I guess there are a few who never stop rebelling."

"We're all out to change the galaxy," Kirk said with a slight smile, which soon faded, "until we find that life changes us, or kills us in the trying."

Simons looked at him sharply, surprised by Kirk's words and the lost look in his eyes. "Jim, are you all right?"

Kirk looked up at him. "Sorry, I guess my mortality's showing. I'll get over it. You were saying?"

Simons looked skeptical but continued. "From the information we've received from the Andorians, Shras' son has joined a group of renegades who are hell bent to make trouble."

"I don't see the problem," Kirk said. "Surely it'd be simple enough to send somebody out, give the kid a spanking and drag him home."

"That's been tried before," Simons said, "and it hasn't done any good. He always goes back to his friends and now those same 'friends', with Sharvas among them, have kidnapped Ambassador Shras, who this time went himself to bring his son home. Apparently they are holding him for ransom from the highest bidder." He looked at Kirk. "The Federation wants him back, Jim, and they don't want to have to pay for him."

Kirk stared at him. "I gather he's being held in territory where the Federation isn't welcome."

Simons nodded. "I'm afraid so." He got to his feet. "It is an area that is far outside Starfleet's authority as well."

Suddenly, Kirk felt tired -- totally drained -- and knew what his answer had to be. He finally faced the truth that McCoy had been nagging at him to admit. On Elba II he had met insane treachery, and made it through an ordeal he had yet to fully come to terms with. He had seen some of the life on worlds where those fleeing from organized civilization congregated. He knew he was in no shape to deal with anything like that. "Admiral," he started.

"Jim," Simons cut in, "I know you must have a good reason when you say you need a rest, and normally I'd accept it with no objection, but I can't this time. If anything should happen to the Ambassador, there's going to be a real blowup. Look, as soon as the basic repairs are done on the **Enterprise**, we'll send her after you. It should only be a couple of weeks." He hesitated for a moment, then went on. "There's something else," he said reluctantly, pressing the intercom. "Would you send Caton in now?" Within seconds, a swarthy man walked in. He had a familiar air of arrogance

that immediately rubbed Kirk the wrong way, just as it always had in the past, as did the minute examination the man took of him, his eyes running the full length of Kirk, a wry smile touching his face when he had finished.

"I'm not sending you into the fray by yourself," Simons said with a smile. "Jim, I'm sure you remember Roaul Caton from your Academy days..."

Kirk slowly rose to his feet. There were very few in Starfleet service who did not know of Roaul Caton, the once highly regarded Starfleet cadet who had suddenly, and for no apparent reason, turned his back on Starfleet and all it stood for to become a common mercenary -- a man who would work for anyone, for any reason, providing the price was right. Over the years, Kirk had seen the product of Caton's work, and some of the harm it had caused. "Roaul," he said with a slight nod of his head. He tried not to let his expression reveal his dislike of this man and all he stood for, yet knew because of his exhaustion, he failed to conceal it completely.

"My, aren't we being formal, Jim," said Caton with a grin as he held out his hand. "It's been a long time since our days at the Academy together, since we were competing to see who could be the best cadet in our class..." His smile faded when Kirk made no effort to return the handshake. He dropped his hand to his side. "You've always denied it, Jim, but we're the same kind of person -- both mavericks, both against the rules that attempt to bind us."

"I work within a code of honor," Kirk replied, his eyes holding Caton's.

Caton chuckled. "I doubt if you will where we're going."

Kirk looked at Simons. "Where am I going, and why is he here?" He knew he was snubbing Caton which probably was not a wise move. As tired as he felt, though, he couldn't bring himself to be diplomatic.

"Mr. Caton is here because the Andorians asked him to be, and because he is familiar with the territory where the Ambassador is being held, something which we are not."

"He is on Danos V, Captain," Caton said. "It is a world like none you've ever seen, a place from which only a survivor returns." He smiled. "If the Andorians had told me they had asked for any other Starfleet officer, I would have refused to go with him. I value my own life too much for that. Most Starfleet personnel, no matter how good, go by the book..."

"And you're saying I don't?" Kirk asked.

Caton looked him over for a moment. "I'm saying at heart you're one of us," he said after a minute. "People who follow rules get killed. You're a survivor, Kirk."

Kirk stared at Caton for a minute, his face unreadable, then he turned back to Simons. "Why not give this assignment to someone else?" he asked. "The *Potemkin*'s in orbit, the *Constitution* is due in next week..."

"Uh, Jim... well..." Simons actually flushed. Finally he forced himself to meet Kirk's eyes. "The fact is, I agree with Caton. You have old fashioned street smarts. I'm not sure that any of the others you mentioned, good as they are, would survive... and the Andorians did ask..."

Kirk stood looking at Simons for a long time. He could see little reason why someone else couldn't cope with this particular problem, nor did he see much coming out of its possible lack of success. Besides, Simons wasn't ordering, he was asking. Finally he drew a deep breath. Kirk knew he couldn't work easily or well with someone he instinctively disliked as much as he had always disliked Roaul Caton. "Admiral," he said quietly, "I'm afraid I must decline." He looked at Caton. "It was interesting to see you again, Roaul, to put a face to the name you have made for yourself..."

"Jim," Simons interrupted, warding off an imminent confrontation, "if you'd let me explain a little more..."

"Admiral, I'm officially off duty for medical reasons. Unless something comes along which involves my ship, my C.M.O. intends to keep me on that status until the Enterprise's overhaul is complete and she is ready to leave orbit." He nodded politely, then left.

For a long time Simons and Caton stood in silence, then Simons let out a long held breath. "He'll talk to his First Officer. Let's let it ride for a couple of days. If we don't hear from him by then, I'll get him back in and order him to go."

"This Andorian is really that important?"

Simons looked at Caton. "He could be the spark to set off a war like no one has ever seen."

"So you need Kirk."

Simons nodded. "I need Kirk."

Caton looked at the door that Kirk had just walked through. You may want him, Simons, he thought, but not as much as I do. I've waited years to get my revenge. Kirk ruined my life with his high and mighty ways and I swear I'm going to see him on his knees in the same gutter he obviously thinks I belong. It's high time to show that Starfleet god who's the better man!



"Am I disturbing you?"

Kirk started at the sound of Spock's voice. He had been expecting the Vulcan to come looking for him for some time, but had found himself half hoping he wouldn't turn up. "No," he said finally.

Spock sat down opposite Kirk. The briefing room was quiet. He glanced at the printout on the viewscreen. "I did not realize you were interested in the Andorian race."

"I'm not," Kirk said sharply. "Spock, what do you know about Roaul Caton?"

Spock's eyebrow rose a little. "Roaul Caton is a mercenary. I believe he was also a Starfleet cadet..."

"I met him this afternoon in Admiral Simons' office."

Spock's eyebrow rose again, but he said nothing.

"Caton has built quite a reputation for himself since he left Starfleet," Kirk went on quietly, "and none of it good. Apparently the Andorians have asked him to be in on this, yet I get the feeling he's after something else."

"Exactly what is 'this'?" Spock asked.

"I'm not altogether sure," Kirk said ruefully. "As soon as I heard 'request' rather than 'order,' I didn't give Simons a chance to explain."

Spock frowned slightly. In all the years he had known Kirk, he could count the times the Captain had refused a mission on the fingers of one hand. McCoy had been right in his assessment of Kirk's condition -- he must indeed be hurting.

"His kid's managed to get in with some bad company," Kirk went on.

"Whose kid?"

"Sorry, I'm not making much sense, am I? Do you remember Ambassador Shras?"

"The Andorian ambassador to the Federation. He was one of the participants at the Babel conference."

"The same," Kirk said. "Apparently his son is rebelling against parental authority and has managed to get in a little over his head." He looked at Spock. "The group he is running with have kidnapped Ambassador Shras, and the Federation wants us to get him out."

"And Roaul Caton is part of it?"

"He appears to be. He knows the area where the Ambassador is supposed to be, but there's something else and I can't seem to put my finger on it."

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean," Spock said.

"That's okay," Kirk said with a slight smile, "I don't understand it either. It's not anything specific that Caton said or did, but there's something about this whole situation that bothers me. I guess the bottom line is that I don't trust him, or his motives." He looked at Spock. "Am I wrong?"

Spock shook his head. "I do not know. I do not fully understand your first impressions, but I have found you are usually correct."

Kirk frowned. "It's not only Caton. Why would Simons be so concerned about the Andorian that he would be willing to send Starfleet into a freeport planet to get him?"

Spock put his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers. "The Andorians are a difficult race to deal with as you know, suspicious and warlike. Recently large deposits of dilithium, pergum and other rare and valuable sources of mineral power have been found throughout the Andorian system. If some unethical power should obtain possession of Ambassador Shras, they could use him as a hostage, a means to try to get some of that vast wealth for themselves. No doubt the Andorians would retaliate to any

threat and, should that happen, the Federation, with which they have a strong alliance, would be forced to move with them."

"War," Kirk said.

Spock nodded. "A war which could allow the Klingons or the Romulans, or both, to start their own. I would imagine it is that which concerns the Admiral. Starfleet cannot fight both within and without itself."

"Shit!" Kirk said under his breath.

"You said Admiral Simons wants us to bring the Ambassador back..."

"I flatly refused," Kirk said. "If the Andorians are willing to go with mercenaries, I'm not all that flattered to be asked to go along." Spock's solemn gaze made Kirk hesitate. "You think I did the wrong thing?"

"No," Spock shifted a little in his seat. "I was just trying to picture the expression on the Admiral's face."

"He wasn't pleased," Kirk admitted. He stared at Spock. "What would you have done?"

Spock folded his hands. "It is a potentially dangerous situation."

"We're talking about a special mission, Spock, and possible sabotage from a lot of different directions. I don't know about you, but I'm not operating at top efficiency at the moment, as you so tactfully pointed out back on Elba II."

Spock had the decency to look embarrassed. "I don't think any of us are," he admitted. "It's been a long time since we have had any real break."

"I'm glad you agree with me." Kirk got to his feet. "Have you seen McCoy anywhere?"

"He beamed down earlier to stock the cabin with supplies. He should be back tomorrow afternoon."

Kirk was silent for a long time, then walked across the briefing room. "McCoy'll have to go with us if we go," he said finally, turning back towards the Vulcan.

"You think we should go."

Kirk looked at him. "You do."

Spock rose to his feet. "I was not with you today. I have no way of knowing if your assessment of Roaul Caton is correct or not but, as for the other, my answer tends towards the affirmative. As the facts stand now, we should consider going if we could be of help."

Kirk ran his hand through his hair. "I don't know. I see your point..." He looked at the Vulcan. "Something tells me to run as far away from this as I can..."



Spock frowned again. Kirk was in no shape to be asked to deal with something like this, to be faced with decisions of such magnitude. "Perhaps a night's sleep will allow us to see the situation more clearly," he suggested lamely. He knew they were empty words, but there was nothing more he could offer.

Kirk nodded slightly, understanding Spock's feeling of helplessness. "It's worth a try," he said. "I'll see you in the morning."



"Bones, are you busy?"

McCoy looked up to see Kirk standing in the doorway of his office. "Never too busy for you, Jim," He watched with narrowing eyes as Kirk slowly made his way to a chair and eased himself down. The effects of Kirk's ordeal on Elba II were still very apparent. "What's up?" he asked gently, hoping Kirk was finally ready to talk.

"Uh, oh... I thought maybe we could share a brandy or something," Kirk said, suddenly unable to say why he had come."

"Uh huh," McCoy said, fully aware from Kirk's obvious discomfort that it wasn't the primary reason why he was there. However, he had learned from experience that you didn't push. Kirk would talk in his own time. "Well, I'm sure I've got something stashed away around here." He searched through the cabinets, finally pulling out a bottle and a couple of glasses. "Afraid I classify this as pure rotgut, even worse than the stuff Scotty fell in love with on the Melkotian planet, but it's been a while since you've allowed me enough shore leave to replenish my stock."

Kirk eyed the bottle suspiciously. "Didn't know anyone made black liquor."

"It probably wasn't that color when it was first bottled," McCoy said. "Be sure to hold your nose when you drink it!" He grinned at Kirk's strangled gasp after an experimental sip.

"Damn, what is that stuff?" Kirk demanded. He picked up the bottle but the label wouldn't come into focus, his eyes were streaming too hard from the effects of the liquor.

"Rigellian nitre, 2027," McCoy supplied helpfully as he took the bottle from Kirk's hand.

"Are you sure it's meant for internal use?"

"Nope," McCoy said, "but it sure does the trick when everything else fails." He poured some for himself, then sat down. "Here's to open sinuses!" he continued, holding his glass aloft, then gingerly took a sip. Once he got his breath back, he looked at Kirk. "Okay, I've supplied the liquor, now you supply the conversation."

Kirk stared moodily into his drink. "Bones," he said finally, "would you say I'm a good judge of character?"

McCoy stared at him for a minute, slightly taken aback. He had been expecting some unburdening of the tensions caused by Kirk's brutal treatment on Elba II. "Well, you can sure pick out the right girl," he said finally.

"I'm being serious," Kirk said bluntly.

"Has this got anything to do with the meeting you had with Admiral Simons yesterday?" McCoy asked.

Kirk nodded but said nothing.

McCoy smashed his drink down on the desk with a rattle of glass. "Are you saying I just spent the last twenty-four hours uselessly stocking a cabin that we're never going to see?" he demanded.

"You haven't answered my question," Kirk said doggedly.

McCoy lifted his glass and, without thinking, took a gulp, coughing hard as the fiery liquid burned its way down his throat. "Okay," he said when he finally got his breath back, "most of the time you astound me at how accurately you assess people."

"And?"

McCoy looked at him levelly. "And there have been a few times when you've been so wrong that you might as well be existing in another dimension."

"Um." Again Kirk stared at his drink.

"Well, when are we going?" McCoy asked finally.

"Where?"

"Damn it, on vacation, where else? For pete's sake, we've talked about nothing else for weeks, and you need it now more than ever." He stared at Kirk. "You're not even listening to me, are you?" Finally he leaned back in his chair. "I have the feeling we're not going on R&R."

"I want to," Kirk said eventually.

"You need it."

Kirk glanced up at him, a wry smile on his face.

"Look," McCoy continued, "I've already certified you as being unfit for duty..."

"I've already told Simons that. As a matter of fact, I've already refused the assignment."

"Then why are you here?"

Kirk looked at him for a minute. "A long time ago we faced intergalactic war together, remember? The Romulans were testing our willingness to fight, and the Enterprise was the only obstacle standing between peace and annihilation."

"I remember," McCoy said softly.

Kirk put his glass back down on the table and got to his feet, his eyes holding McCoy's. "Why me?" he asked, his voice burning with anger. "Why the hell is it always

me?" He turned and walked out of the room, leaving McCoy with his mouth dropped open in astonishment.



The freezing sleet pelted them in the face as they hurried down the darkened alley. Kirk pulled up the collar of his heavy jacket around his ears, then slipped the peak of the dark cap down over his face as far as he could and still see where he was going. He glanced over to see that Spock and McCoy had done likewise. Splotches of green showed over the Vulcan's cheekbones, indicating he was having trouble acclimating to the damp cold.

Kirk touched Caton on the arm. "Much further?"

"Couple of miles. Why?"

Kirk glanced over at Spock again and his mind was made up instantly. "It's cold."

"Hell, that's easy to fix." Caton ducked down an adjoining alley and through a creaking door. Almost immediately they were hit by an oppressive heat as they walked into a room jammed full of people. A few glanced at them, then looked away, showing no real interest. "Squeeze your way through the crowd to the bar," Caton said. "I'll be right there."

The Starfleet men glanced at each other, then Kirk shrugged his shoulders and led the way into the jostling crowd. They had almost reached their destination when a large man blocked Kirk's path.

"Who are you, pretty boy?" he asked, a flick of his massive hands knocking Kirk back against Spock. The Vulcan felt Kirk stiffen as his sore back banged against his First Officer's bony frame. Unobtrusively, he supported Kirk until his Captain regained his balance, then he deftly moved forward before Kirk could react to the insult, taking off his hat as he stopped in front of the heavy set man.

"You will excuse us, sir, but we would like to get something warm to drink."

The man looked Spock up and down. "Like maybe a little hot chocolate?" he asked with a roar of laughter. "Anyway, I was talking to baby face there. I'm not interested in you."

"I do not suggest you pursue your interest any further," Spock said, his voice quiet.

"Says who?"

"Spock..." Kirk's warning voice sounded from behind the Vulcan, but before Spock could answer, the man roughly pushed him aside.

"Now, pretty boy, as I was saying..." He reached out and grabbed Kirk by the arm. Instinctively, Kirk struck out with his other hand, almost breaking it when it impacted on the solid flesh of his assailant. At the same instant, Spock's fingers closed on the man's neck, and he went down like a felled tree.

Kirk wrenched his arm free and then looked at Spock. "Thanks."

The Vulcan bowed his head slightly but said nothing.

"You okay, Jim?" McCoy asked as Kirk gingerly rubbed his bruising knuckles.

"A couple more black and blue spots," Kirk said. "Nothing serious."

"Having problems, gentlemen?" came Caton's voice as he walked up to them. It was hard to miss as everyone in the room was staring at them, and at the prone figure on the floor.

"It has been resolved," Spock said.

"So I see," Caton replied. "Well, I got us a table. Why don't you go and sit down while I get the drinks?" He gestured to an empty table in the far corner of the room.

Kirk stared at him for a moment, then nodded to the others. "Let's go." They settled themselves at the table, then Kirk looked at Spock. "That was a setup," he said shortly.

"Setup?" Spock echoed.

McCoy stared at Kirk. "Why would he want to get you into a fight?"

"I don't know," Kirk replied, "except he doesn't like me any more than I like him."

"That is illogical reasoning," Spock said.

"You should be used to that from me by now," Kirk said with a grin. He sobered as he saw a shiver run through the Vulcan. "You okay?" His question quickly brought McCoy's attention to the Vulcan.

Spock nodded. "Becoming accustomed to a controlled climate like that on the Enterprise is sometimes not a good thing," he said quietly.

"Bull, it shows you're tired," McCoy snorted, "just like the rest of us."

"I agree with Bones," Kirk said. "I've seen you cold before, but you don't usually turn green. Damn Simons anyway!"

"Jim, we all agreed this is necessary."

"Here you go," Caton said, reappearing from the crowd. "Hot tanao for you, Spock, it's non-alcoholic. You don't drink, do you? I've yet to meet a Vulcan who does."

"Thank you," Spock said as he gratefully wrapped his cold hands around the steaming mug.

Kirk was struggling out of his coat as Caton pushed drinks over to him and McCoy. "A local whiskey, Jim. It's a little bitter going down, but warms the blood quickly."

"Alcohol does not warm the blood, Mr. Caton," Spock observed. "On the contrary, it makes one more susceptible to the cold."

"Come off it, Spock," McCoy grumbled. "At least it has the effect of making you not care if it's cold out." Spock gave him a withering look.

"I liked your display of teamwork at the bar, Captain," Caton said. "Blackwell usually takes what he wants. He won't be happy that Spock interfered."

"You knew that was going to happen," Kirk stated as a matter of fact.

"I told you about survivors," Caton replied mildly. "A man does not live long on this planet without that instinct." He looked at Kirk. "You don't like to be used."

Kirk met his look, his eyes darkening. "I won't be a pawn in someone else's chess game."

Their eyes held for a long moment, then Caton smiled slightly, the challenge accepted. He took off his coat and sat down as Kirk took an experimental sip of his drink.

"This stuff does more than warm -- it burns," Kirk said after a minute. His words momentarily called a truce to the building tension between Caton and himself.

"Takes the lining right out of the stomach," McCoy said appreciatively, letting out a long held breath and allowing himself to relax.

"Not good for ulcers," Caton agreed. He looked at Kirk. "We'll spend the night at a friends' place, then start our inquiries about the Andorian in the morning." He glanced at Spock for a moment, then turned his attention back to Kirk. "Captain, I suggest you be careful. These men don't have much beauty in their lives..." As he spoke, Spock's mouth tightened as Caton's real meaning became clear, and his eyes went to Kirk. Caton saw the smile of reassurance before Kirk brought his gaze back to him.

"I'm not an easy man to take."

"Or break?" Caton asked.

"I suggest you don't try finding out," Kirk said quietly, but there was no mistaking the warning in his voice, or the silent backup from the Vulcan sitting at his side.

Caton sat quietly for a moment, then downed the last of his drink. "Well, we better get going," he said. Kirk grabbed for his coat and cap and headed out the back door behind Caton's rapidly disappearing figure, Spock and McCoy hot on his heels.

It was sleetting harder as they ran down the alley. They ducked in and out of doorways, trying for as much shelter as they could get as they made their way down the dark, slippery road. Just when Kirk decided he was getting too wet and cold to keep going without registering a protest, Caton disappeared down a steep flight of crumbling stairs.

The basement they entered was as hot as the last room they had been in, however this one was deserted. Caton led them through a trap door down into a honeycomb of rooms below.

"The authorities, such as they are, don't bother to search very carefully. We'll be safe here." Caton said. He pointed to a pile of food stacked on the table. "Help yourselves. I'm going to see if Elbie is home, let him know he has guests. I won't be long. Oh, there's a lot of spare clothing over there. It should be clean. You might be more comfortable in dry stuff."

The three of them stood in silence for a few minutes, then Kirk looked at Spock. "I think we'd better do something to warm you up. You're making me cold shivering like that."

"He's not shivering half as hard as you are, Jim-boy," McCoy said dryly, but there was no missing the concern shining out of the blue eyes.

"I'm okay," Kirk said shortly.

"Sure you are," McCoy observed. "Don't know why you keep me on, considering you know so much more about medicine and the human condition than I do."

"Perhaps, gentlemen," Spock said, stepping in to ward off the confrontation, "we should take Mr. Caton's offer of dry clothing. We would all feel better if we rid ourselves of the wet garments we have on at the moment."

McCoy glared at Spock, but Kirk took the hint and walked forward, effectively cutting off McCoy's harangue "Sounds like a good idea, Spock. Let's see what we have here." He rummaged through the pile, finally holding up a sweater that could have held three of him. "I'd hate to meet the original owner of this. It must have been one of Ruk's relatives."

"With your record of out talking machines, there wouldn't be much to worry about," McCoy said, taking the sweater from him. "Come on, look for something more practical before you turn blue!"

A few minutes later they were dry and getting warmer and had started sorting out the food. After they filled their plates, they took them to an old battered table and sat down.

"Jim, you'd better eat something, not just sit there pushing food around your plate."

Kirk glanced up at McCoy. "I'm not very hungry, Bones."

McCoy frowned. "You're still hurting," he said bluntly.

Hazel eyes met his, then Kirk went back to toying with his meal. "It's nothing a night's sleep won't fix."

"You need proper R&R, not a couple of hours sleep," McCoy muttered as he turned his attention back to his own dinner.

Kirk nibbled on a corner of a chunk of bread, then looked at Spock, a tiny smile acknowledging the worry in the Vulcan's eyes. "We may have to find the Andorian ambassador on our own. I don't know that we're going to be able to work with Caton."

"The Andorians did request his presence."

"Did they?" Kirk turned the bread over in his hands. "Or did Caton offer his services, then ask for me?" He looked back at Spock.

"An interesting question," Spock admitted.

"Isn't it," Kirk said. He glanced over at McCoy who was looking at him with a puzzled frown. "Roaul Caton and I were in the same year at the Academy," he said quietly. "We were always neck and neck in everything that we did." He toyed with his bread for a few minutes longer. "Gradually I started coming out on top -- I guess he resented it. Anyway, about half way through our final year, he dropped out -- no one really knew why. Shortly after that, we started hearing about his exploits as a soldier of fortune. Some of us envied him in a way -- envied his freedom while we were still slogging away under the discipline of Starfleet..."

"Do I hear a note of envy, Jim?" McCoy asked curiously.

Kirk glanced up at him, then grinned. "You are hearing the wistfulness of youth," he said. "Caton's world is a fantasy world, Bones. It doesn't exist. If I had gone to find it, it wouldn't have been there..."

"And you would be as disillusioned as Roaul Caton is now," Spock finished for him.

Kirk looked at him for a moment. "You have to remain true to yourself," he agreed.

"Well, it's all set up," Caton called out as he walked into the room. "We can have this place for as long as we need it." He got himself some food, then sat down across the table from Kirk. "I figure that we find this Andorian kid, get him to take us to his father and we can be on our way." He glanced up from his meal. "You can get yet another citation from Starfleet, Jim."

Kirk stared at him. "You're carrying an awfully big chip on your shoulder, Caton."

Caton's eyebrows rose. "I just don't happen to like rules or regulations, or those who enforce them."

"Many men find they can't work within structured rules," McCoy observed, "yet they don't turn to the kind of life you have chosen."

"I live for myself, Doctor," Caton said. "How that affects others is none of my concern." He looked back at Kirk. "I don't believe in representing views of others when I don't agree with them. I can't believe you haven't felt that way yourself at times."

Spock looked at Kirk. He knew the many times Kirk's frustrations with Starfleet and the Federation had led him to bend the rules when it was needed. Kirk looked back at him, and a small smile touched his face before he turned his attention back to Caton, a smile that Caton did not miss.

"I took an oath," Kirk said.

"I took the same one. It no longer binds me."

"Mine still does."

Spock found himself holding his breath as the tension built. McCoy's eyes went from one man to the other, ready to break in if the need arose.

"Do you think that makes you the better man, Kirk?" Caton asked.

"You tell me."

The silence drew out. Spock and McCoy realized that Caton really was pushing for something from Kirk, and they both knew Kirk didn't like to be pushed. Kirk's darkened eyes and quiet demeanor told them that he was ready to blow. For a long time Kirk's eyes were locked with Caton's, daring him to go any further with the conversation. Finally Caton got up. "We'd better turn in. We've got a long day tomorrow."



They spent the next day combing the back alleys and hovels of the large city, talking with the elements of mankind that the Starfleet men rarely had reason to come into contact with; meeting the outcasts of civilization, and of life.

Kirk spent a great deal of his time extricating himself from awkward situations, or having Spock step in to help. Caton had been right about Kirk's looks causing him a great deal of trouble. Caton did nothing to help; he simply stood out of the way, a smirk on his face as Kirk was pawed at in ways he had never been subjected to in his life.

Kirk and Spock wearily sat down on the side of the grassy hillside. McCoy and Caton had left a few minutes earlier to get something to eat. McCoy had been watching Kirk with growing concern, and he knew that Spock was gradually losing his temper because of the insults that Kirk was undergoing. He decided that it was high time to get Caton away and try to find out what was behind the man's behavior, if anything.

"Six days and we're not getting anywhere," Kirk said as he leaned back, discouragement sounding strong in his voice.

"We have been following many false leads," Spock agreed.

"We've been following Caton's lead," Kirk said bluntly. He glanced over to see Spock's questioning look. "I don't like his brand of leadership." He lay back in the deep grass. "Remember when we were back on the *Enterprise*... I said I didn't trust him?"

"I remember."

Kirk stared at the blue sky for a few minutes. "I still don't know what he wants, Spock, but at least I now know he's after me."

Spock looked at him. "What reason would he have?"

Kirk shrugged. "I have no idea. I last saw the man when I was twenty years old..." He ran his hand over his face, then lifted the same hand into the air and stared at the faint trembling that was still present -- the aftereffects of Elba II. Spock also noted the faint tremor but said nothing. "Twenty years old," Kirk repeated softly. "It seems like centuries ago, back when I had no cares, no responsibilities..." His voice died away and his hand dropped down into the grass. "No one ever asked me to save the world in those days," he said eventually.

"No one had to," Spock replied. "I am sure you were out to do it on your own."

Kirk glanced over at him. "Simons said something very much like that." He pillow'd his hands behind his head. "Maybe youthful ideals shouldn't have to die," he continued.

"Have yours?" Spock asked.

Kirk looked at him with a bemused expression. "Hanging out your shingle, Spock?"

"My shingle?" Spock looked genuinely puzzled. Kirk chuckled. "An old Earth expression. In the old days, members of the medical profession used to hand out a sign with their name and their speciality on it. It was called a shingle, a word which eventually came to known as a term for a good listener."

"Well, I am hardly a doctor," Spock started.

"No," Kirk agreed, "but you are a friend. Sometimes that's even better."

Spock opened his mouth to answer, but before he could think of anything to say, Caton and McCoy appeared around the corner.

"Here we go," McCoy said as he sat down beside Kirk. "Food to keep body and soul together for a few more hours."

"Doctor, what you refer to as the spirit does not require nourishment in the same manner as the physical..."

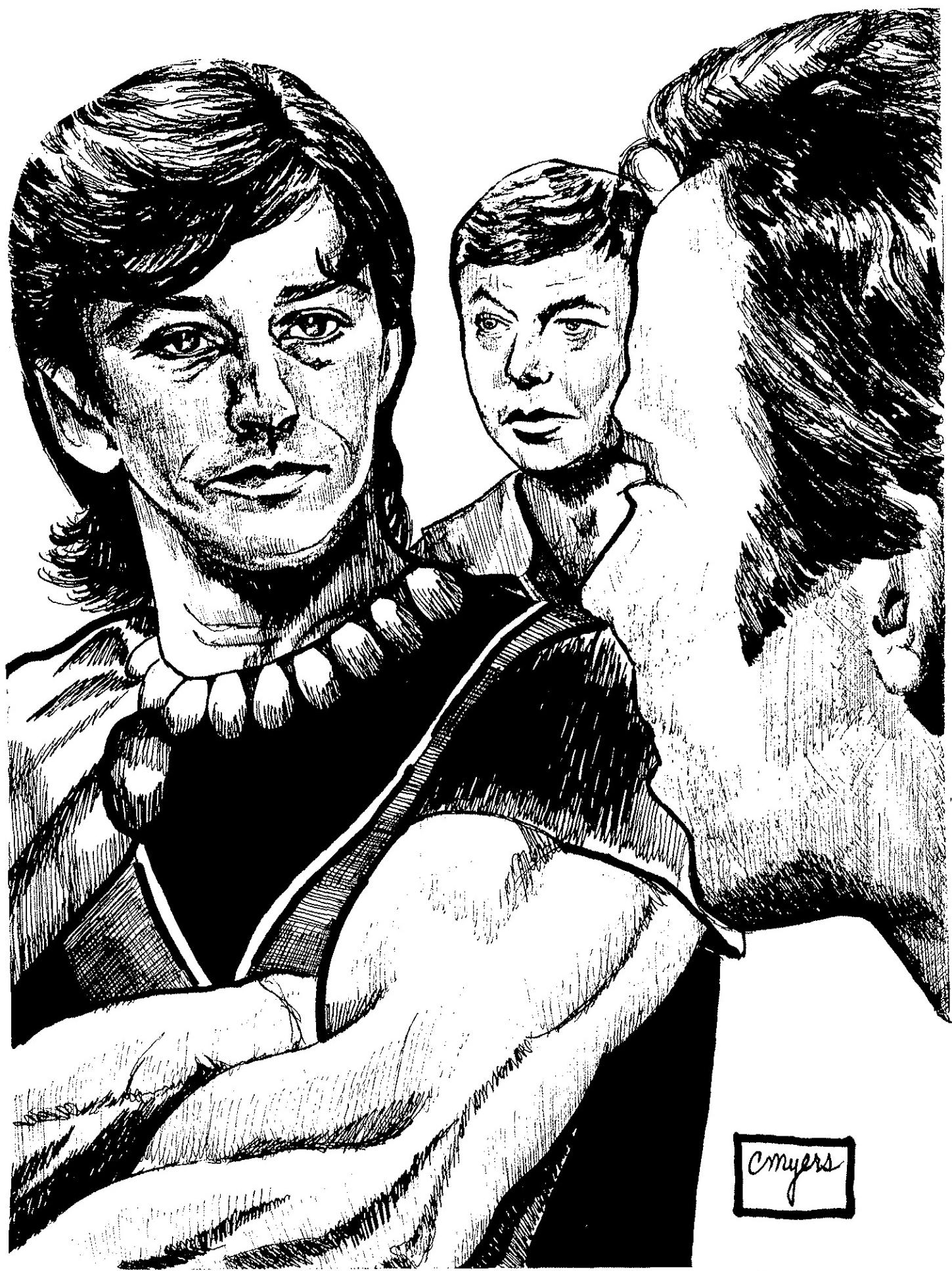
"Spare me, Spock!" McCoy pleaded. "It is just a Human expression."

Spock's eyebrow lifted. "As illogical as a shingle," he muttered as he turned his attention to the food.

"As a what?" McCoy asked.

"Never mind, Bones," Kirk cut in. "Spock and I were just passing the time in idle conversation. We'd better eat quickly. We've got a lot of territory to cover this afternoon." He looked at Caton. "I think it's time to split up. You know this place -- we're just a hindrance tagging along behind. I think you should be on your own and let us run our own risks. It's more likely you'll find out what we need that way."

Caton stared at him for a minute. "You really think you can exist on your own in these conditions, don't you?"



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Kirk stared back at him, deliberately ignoring Caton's tone. "I know I can."

A lopsided smile touched Caton's mouth. "Care to place a bet on that?"

"I don't bet on a sure thing," Kirk said bluntly. "We know our way around fairly well. We'll meet you back at the house tonight."

Caton stared at him for a few minutes, then got up. "Have it your way, Jim. I hope you have a good day." He smiled, then turned and walked away.

"Good riddance," McCoy said to Caton's disappearing back.

"What now?" Spock asked.

"Now we track down every Andorian on Danos V," Kirk said. "Somebody must know something. It's just a matter of asking."



"I think it's time to stop this charade," Caton said. "Kirk is starting to get suspicious."

The large man sat looking at Caton. "You said we weren't going to go for it yet."

"Forget what I said. Kirk knows that something's wrong, and he's one smart customer, Wagner. If I miss this opportunity, I may never get another. Tell Sharvas to be ready. We'll do it tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Wagner agreed.



"What happened to you?" Caton asked with a grin as Spock helped Kirk through the door.

"Someone got a bit too fresh -- I lost my temper," Kirk said coldly. He took his arm from around Spock's neck. He didn't say anything about the beating that Spock had not been entirely able to prevent. He looked at Caton. "Any news?"

"Maybe. We'll talk about it over dinner."

"You'll have to make that breakfast," McCoy said, shooting a troubled look at Kirk. "You'd better get some sleep, Jim. You're almost out on your feet."

Kirk nodded. "I can't seem to think straight. Guess I had too many propositions for one day."

"Come on," McCoy said, "I'll fix you up."

As Kirk slowly undressed, McCoy got out his medikit. The scanner was running as Kirk pulled the sweater he was wearing off over his head. "Bones, I'll live," he protested as his head emerged from the garment.

"Your system is still screwed up from Elba II," McCoy said shortly. His eyes softened. "That man using you as a punching bag certainly didn't help matters any."

"There's no time to worry about that. We've got a job to do here first, a job that Caton is making very difficult."

"You've dealt with worse," McCoy said.

"Maybe so, but at least I knew what they were after."

"You know what I think?" McCoy asked.

"What?"

"That Caton's jealous."

"Jealous? Of what?"

"Of you. You represent the best of Starfleet... and don't give me that look because you know it's the truth. I think he sees in you what he could have been himself. He was up there once."

"He left of his own accord," Kirk said.

"Agreed. Apparently he had one question too many with the hows and whys of the military, just as we've all had. But you're the stronger man, and he knows it. You have morals he has long since betrayed, and you are eating out his gut by daring to live by the code of civilization."

"But what does he want of me?"

McCoy put down his scanner and picked up the hypo, pressing it against Kirk's arm. "It'll relieve that aching for a few hours, let you get some sleep."

Kirk stared at him for a moment. "You are evading my question, Doctor."

McCoy put the hypo away, then looked at Kirk. "Jealousy is not a pretty thing, Jim. I think he would like to destroy you if he can."

"Come on, Bones. I doubt if he's just going to take out a phaser and kill me."

"I didn't say kill, I said destroy. Sometimes that can be worse than death. I'd be very careful if I were you."

Kirk could feel the effects of the drug McCoy had pumped into him. "That's a hell of a thing to say to someone you've just knocked off his feet, Doctor," he said as he tried to keep his eyes focused.

"Agreed," McCoy said as he helped Kirk lie down, "but when you wake up in the morning, you'll have something to think about." He carefully tucked blankets around Kirk's relaxing body. "Remember, Spock and I are always here," he said as Kirk's eyes closed. "Damn Starfleet," he muttered as he looked down at Kirk. "Damn your sense of duty. The Catons of this life don't get themselves into messes like this!"



Spock and Caton were getting something to eat when McCoy walked into the room. "He's asleep," McCoy answered in response to Spock's raised eyebrow.

"I'm sorry your Captain's not joining us," Caton said as he sat down.

Spock did not look at him. "He needs rest."

Caton took a bite of his sandwich, then looked up as Spock sat down. "You don't like me much, do you, Spock?"

McCoy looked up sharply, recognizing from Caton's tone of voice that a confrontation was in the making. Spock met his gaze, then turned his attention back to Caton. "Vulcans have no emotions, Mr. Caton, so likes and dislikes..."

"Don't give me that bull," Caton interrupted. "I'm a man in a man's world, Spock. I've seen the way you look at Kirk, the way you support him, protect him..."

"That is hardly any of your business, Mr. Caton."

"Everything that happens here is my business, especially when it could affect what I have planned..." He broke off as Spock's head snapped up.

"What plan?" the Vulcan asked coldly.

Caton shrugged. "Nothing. It's just that Kirk depends on you so much, and..."

"And?"

Caton was surprised by the hostility in Spock's eyes. "Hey, look, I was just making conversation."

Spock got to his feet, the slow, catlike movement sending chills down Caton's spine. McCoy found himself balanced on the balls of his feet, ready to launch himself at Spock if the need arose. There was a menacing danger in the way the Vulcan approached Caton.

"You talk about feelings, Mr. Caton," Spock said in a quiet voice, "... emotions, but you don't understand them. You know only wants -- your wants. I was not totally honest with you. Vulcans do have emotions. We speak of a bond, and I hold to be the highest task of a bond between two people that each should stand guard over the vulnerability of the other." His dark eyes bored into Caton. "I trust I make myself clear?"

My god, McCoy thought, Spock's baring his soul to this man! Obviously I'm not the only one who senses the danger.

"Is that a threat, Spock?" Caton asked, trying to gather some of his former bravado.

Spock shook his head. "Vulcans do not make threats. I would recommend you remember that." Without waiting for an answer, Spock turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

"Is he always that pleasant?" Caton asked eventually.

McCoy slowly eased the crushing grip he had unconsciously formed on his coffee cup. "When he has cause," he answered. He got to his feet. "I would take heed of what he said, Mr. Caton. Vulcans do not make threats, nor do they bluff, and Spock is more than capable of killing. Goodnight, sir."

McCoy found Spock standing over Kirk's silent figure. He glanced up at McCoy's arrival, but said nothing.

"I warned Jim earlier," McCoy said finally.

Spock nodded. "The Captain said from the moment he first saw Caton that there was a danger." He looked down at Kirk. "Until now, I did not realize how great that danger was."

"He'll make it, Spock," McCoy said quietly. "We all will." He looked around. "I think I'll go for a walk -- keep Caton in sight, so to speak."

Spock nodded again. "I shall stay with the Captain."



"So, Captain, you continue to resist. How foolish of you." To his horror, Kirk found himself being pushed into the torture chair on Elba II, only this time it wasn't Garth of Izar who was holding the mechanism that would control his agony, but Roaul Caton.

"Your resistance is so useless. I am the better one. All you have to do is get down on your knees and admit it. Grovel in the gutter as you would have me do."

"No."

"No? Perhaps a little persuasion would help..." Caton pointed the instrument at Kirk and once again the unbelievable pain he remembered coursed through his body — the pain that had been with him since he had first sat in the chair in what now seemed a lifetime ago.

He tried to scream but was incapable of making any sound. He twisted and writhed, but was unable to break free. He could feel the sweat break out all over his body as the pain threshold weakened.

And suddenly stopped. Barely holding onto the edge of consciousness, he looked up at his tormentor.

"Are you ready yet?" Caton asked.

Kirk shook his head, knowing he was not capable of speech.

"A pity. Perhaps another show of my strength will convince you..." He waved his hand and a panel in the wall opened. "I presume you recognize your First Officer," he said.

Kirk watched in horror at the sight of Spock staggering through the poisonous atmosphere of Elba II.

"A Vulcan is stronger than a Human. It will take longer for him to die, but he will die... and most horribly."

Kirk couldn't tear his eyes away from the Vulcan who was now on his knees, clawing at his eyes and throat.

"Look at him, Kirk, blind and strangling, dying, all because of your pride! You are killing your best friend. You are killing the man who loves you!"

"No!" Kirk started to heave himself out of the chair, but Caton moved too quickly and the searing pain slammed him back, totally helpless.

"Oh, no you don't, Kirk. I want to hear you say it. Bow down to me as the man who defeated the great James T. Kirk!"

"Spock!" Kirk's cry was one of pure agony torn from the depths of his soul. He was ready to do anything that Caton asked of him. Caton had taken Spock, he had taken Kirk's other self. There was nothing left.



"Jim, wake up!"

Kirk gradually grew aware of strong arms wrapped around his shoulders, then recognized the voice. "Spock?"

The Vulcan slowly sat back, but kept his hands supporting Kirk's shoulders. "You were having a nightmare," he said softly.

"An... nightmare..." Kirk's body began to shake. "Oh god, you were dying... I caused it. That damned chair..."

"What chair? Jim, I'm not dead, I'm here. I'm here with you. You're all right."

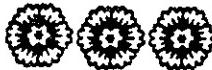
"A dream... it was so real!" He looked at Spock. "Your death... I could do nothing to stop him, just as I could do nothing to stop Garth. Only this time it wasn't Marta, it was you..." He started to tremble, the terrible images of Elba II crowding back into his memory. "He beat me, Spock," he said, his voice trembling. "I gave him everything he wanted, and I didn't care..."

Spock quickly slipped his arms around Kirk's shaking body. The floodgates of Elba II were letting go. "It's all right, Jim, that pain has ended. We won that fight."

Kirk did not answer, only buried his head in Spock's shoulder as Spock sat holding him firmly. He had no idea what hell had brought Kirk to this point, but McCoy had told him often enough that Humans needed to release their inner turmoil in order to gain back their strength. He had also said that Kirk could not do it alone. He's hurt, and he's hurting... be there for him.



It was a long time before Kirk grew quiet in the firm embrace of the Vulcan. Making sure he was asleep, Spock reached out and pulled the blankets around both of them. He would not leave Kirk alone that night.



Spock was already awake as Kirk gradually regained consciousness the next morning. He had been studying Kirk's ravaged face which not even deep sleep had smoothed.

Kirk slowly took in the fact that he was lying in the Vulcan's arms, and that Spock was making no effort to let go. He then looked around the room. "We're not on Elba II," he said eventually.

"Danos V," Spock replied helpfully.

Kirk looked back at him. "I didn't kill you."

"Not yet," Spock agreed, a slight smile touching his mouth.

Kirk reluctantly moved out of the Vulcan's embrace. "Then I just had a dream that would have McCoy analyzing for a month."

Spock pushed himself to a sitting position. "McCoy warned me something like this was coming." He watched Kirk, worry clear in his eyes. "Are you all right?" he asked finally.

Kirk looked down at the floor for a long time, then spoke without looking at Spock. "Did I kneel at Caton's feet?"

Spock's eyebrow flew into his hairline.

"Did I?" came Kirk's voice again, demanding, yet not wanting to know.

"You have too much strength to ever kneel at anyone's feet," Spock said carefully.

Kirk looked at him, hope starting to show in the hazel eyes. "Then it was a dream?"

"It was all a dream. You are every bit the man you have always been."

"Well, it's about time the two of you woke up. I was getting tired of checking in on you." McCoy's cheery voice came from the doorway. He walked in taking a careful assessment of Kirk. "You look like you've been through hell, Jim," he said.

"I think I have been," Kirk said with a feeble grin. "It must have been a combination of a bedside conversation and chemicals. I just had one hell of a nightmare." He shuddered. "I've never had one so real before." He looked up at McCoy. "Don't worry, Spock helped me through it."

McCoy looked at the Vulcan who stared blandly back. Once again it was territory he shared with Kirk. McCoy had no part of it.

"Well," McCoy said, "Caton wants to get going soon. He's in an awful hurry to find the ambassador and be on his way. He suddenly doesn't appear to be very fond of our company." He looked pointedly at Spock.

Kirk instantly noticed the look. "Is there something you should be telling me, Mr. Spock?" he asked, looking from McCoy to the Vulcan.

Spock shook his head. "Nothing of interest, Captain."

Bull, thought McCoy, but there's no use going into it now, Jim's obviously shaken enough. But I'll tell him, Spock, when the time is right. He deserves to know the lengths you'll go to for him.

"Well, we'd better get going then," Kirk said as he got to his feet. For a moment his body shook from the lingering weakness, then he stood tall in front of the Vulcan. "I'm sorry, Spock," he said softly.

Spock looked up at him and the expression in the Vulcan's eyes told Kirk the apology was unnecessary. Spock fully understood that Kirk was only starting to come to grips with himself.



"From what we discovered yesterday," Caton said as they left the house, "I'd bet we'll find out something about the Andorian down on the south side."

Kirk stopped as they reached the street. "I meant what I said yesterday, Caton. The Andorians asked for your help and they asked for mine. They said nothing about us having to work together..."

"Or are you just saying you don't want to work with the likes of me?" Caton asked, his eyes narrowing.

"You can take it any way you like," Kirk replied, his eyes locking with Caton's. "We don't mesh... you don't think or act like..."

"Like what?" Caton sneered. "Like the wonder boy that now represents Starfleet?" He glanced at Spock and saw that the Vulcan had taken a step forward. The cold look on the Vulcan's face once again sent shivers down Caton's spine. Loyalty to a man or an ideal was something completely foreign to Caton's nature, but he was beginning to see the dangers in confronting it. "Okay," he said, turning his attention back to Kirk, "if you're so damned sure you can find the ambassador, then you do it. I quit. I've got other things I could be doing for a lot more profit." He turned and walked away.

"You sure know how to get a man's dander up, Jim-boy," McCoy said as he watched Caton's rapidly disappearing figure.

"Public relations was never my thing," Kirk said and then looked at Spock. "Well, looks like we're on our own." An eyebrow rose slightly, but Spock said nothing.

A long walk and many bars later brought them to a seedy establishment. Spock paused at the entrance. "This appears to be a 'rough spot' I believe is how Mr. Caton described such a place. We had best watch ourselves."

"We'll be all right," Kirk said, his eyes hard. "If nothing else, Caton has given us plenty of opportunities to practice self defense."

The bar stank of stale smoke and was so hazy that it was difficult to see across the room. Once Spock's eyes adjusted to the gloom, he touched Kirk's shoulder and handed him a holograph. "Over there, Captain. I believe that's the Ambassador's son."

Kirk looked at the slender Andorian, then glanced down at the holograph. "It certainly looks like the same person," he agreed. "I'll go over and talk with him. You and Bones keep your eyes open for trouble."

Kirk made his way with some difficulty across the crowded room. "Mind if I join you?" he asked when he finally reached the Andorian's table.

The Andorian looked up. "As a matter of fact, I do."

Kirk slipped into a chair, then reached out and took hold of the Andorian's wrist. "Sharvas, I'd like to talk."

The Andorian started at the sound of his name. "How do you know who I am?" he asked as he tried to pull his arm away, surprise showing on his face as he discovered how strong the Human was.

"That's not important at the moment. I'm James Kirk, a friend of your father's. If I let go, will you stay? I really do only want to talk."

Sharvas looked at Kirk's hand for a moment, then nodded. Kirk slowly let go, but the Andorian didn't move. "So talk," Sharvas said eventually.

"Is your father all right?"

"Of course he's all right. You don't think I'd let anybody hurt him, do you?"

"I don't know. I don't know the people who are holding him, but I do know what they want." He looked at Sharvas. "Civilization cannot bow to terrorism."

"Meaning what?"

Kirk looked at him for a minute. "Meaning the Federation is going to take him back -- no exchanges, no money, just the ambassador."

"You're mad!"

Kirk smiled. "Quite possibly, or I wouldn't be here now." He sobered. "Sharvas, I need to know where he is, and who's holding him."

The Andorian stared at him for a long time. "You're like all the others. You say you want to talk, but you really want something else. Caton was right..."

"Roaul Caton? What has he got to do with this?" The Andorian sat in silence and Kirk could sense that he was withdrawing. "Look, I'm really not going to force you to tell me, but I'm going to find out what I want, Sharvas, one way or another." He glanced around. "Do you really like it here? This doesn't look like a place one would want to stay in for very long."



"And you don't look like someone who normally frequents such an establishment," came a strange voice as a heavy hand dropped onto Kirk's shoulder. Kirk looked up to see a group of men standing around the table, and in their midst Spock and McCoy were being forced to stand very still.

"You've been snooping around too much, Mister, and we in this place don't like snoops." The brawny man pulled Kirk to his feet. "Who are you?"

Kirk stood in silence. The man backhanded him, almost snapping his head off his neck.

"Leave him alone!" McCoy demanded.

"Not unless he tells us who he is."

"He said he was James Kirk," Sharvas said. Kirk stopped wiping the blood that was trickling from his mouth and stared at the Andorian, his eyes dark and angry.

"Well, well, James T. Kirk, the Starfleet genius. I hear there's a hefty reward in certain quarters for this little package. And what are you doing on Danos V, James T. Kirk?"

"It's none of your business."

"Everything is my business. Maybe your friends will tell us."

"They won't talk."

The man stared at Kirk, then glanced over at the Andorian. "I think I know someone who will talk if the price is right," he said with a sneer.

"He knows nothing," Kirk said. "I was seeking information from him, but he knew little to help me."

"And what is it you want to know?"

Kirk took a desperate gamble, but it was the only option he had. "I'll tell you, but on one condition..."

"Which is?"

"That my friends, including the Andorian, are free to leave." He stared at the man. "You said I was worth something to you. They're not, and it's a lot easier to deal with one man than it is four."

McCoy and Spock looked at each other, not liking what they were hearing. The Andorian stared at Kirk.

"You're right about that," mused the large man. "Okay, but they'll die if I see any of them around here again."

Kirk nodded, then looked at the others. Spock, take Sharvas with you. McCoy, you go too..."

"Jim..."

"No argument on this one, Spock. It's only me they want. Now get going!" Kirk watched in silence as the others filed out, then turned to the group of men. "Now what?"

The man smiled. "There's your information, for one thing. Also I believe I know some Klingons who would pay handsomely to get you in their clutches." He nodded to one of the others. "Tie his hands. I want to get him to a safe holding place before anyone else realizes who he is and tries to take him from us."

Someone brought out a rawhide cord and tied Kirk's hands behind his back. The cord bit painfully into Kirk's flesh and almost immediately started cutting off the circulation. "All right, Fed, let's move!" Kirk was shoved none too gently towards the door.

As he stepped out into the bright sunshine, Kirk saw something move out of the corner of his eye. The brawny man saw the same movement and quickly pulled his phaser, firing at the oncoming figure. Kirk took a rolling dive forward, but did not move quickly enough to completely miss the phaser blast. Regaining his feet solely by momentum, he saw Spock pick up a stout club and turn towards him. Five men were lying motionless in the street.

"Hurry, Captain, we do not have much time." Spock grabbed Kirk by the elbow and started running down the street. Kirk moved awkwardly, hampered by his bound hands and the dizzying pain of the phaser stun.

"Thought... I told you to get... to get out of here."

"The others are only minutes ahead of us. Coming back to get you should not impede our return to our hiding place to any significant extent."

A few minutes later they came across the Andorian kneeling over McCoy's prone body.

"Oh my god, McCoy!" Kirk's voice was a mere whisper. "Spock..."

Spock dropped onto his knees, pulling the medikit out from under McCoy. Within seconds he was running the scanner.

"What happened?" Kirk demanded, turning to the Andorian.

"An aircar, the driver ran right into us. It was deliberate..."

A moan from McCoy distracted him. "Ouch," McCoy said groggily as Spock helped him to sit up.

"Take it easy, Bones," Kirk said.

"You have received a rather severe blow to the head, Doctor. I would not suggest moving quickly."

"We may have to," Kirk said. "If those men you ambushed pick up our trail, or that mad aircar driver comes back, we're in trouble." He looked at Sharvas. "Can you untie me?"

As the Andorian started to untie his hands, Kirk could feel the familiar tremors start to go through his body -- a result of phaser stun. "Damn," he said as he started to sag. The Andorian caught him, then looked over at Spock who was holding McCoy steady.

"I think we have a problem," he said quietly.

Spock had already noticed the group of men running down the street towards them. "We have a definite problem," he agreed. He picked up the club and tossed it across to the Andorian. "Are you with us?" he asked.

The Andorian nodded. "Kirk offered his life in place of mine," he said glancing down at the man in his arms. He looked back at Spock. "The man who tried to kill us belongs to the same group as I do. The message was loud and clear. They want you dead, and they don't care if I die with you. You bet I want to help. What do you want me to do?"

"Help the Captain." Spock looked at McCoy. "Are you able to travel, Doctor?"

"Don't worry about me, Spock."

"Good. Then help get the Captain back to our hideout..."

"What about you?"

"I'll come when I can. Please, just get him out of here!"

McCoy grabbed one of Kirk's arms and pulled it around his shoulders, the Andorian did the same on Kirk's other side and the two of them took off running down the street. Spock pulled out his phaser and turned toward their pursuers.



"Damn it, McCoy, why did you let him stay behind by himself?" Kirk demanded as he anxiously paced around the room.

"Have you ever tried to say no to a determined Vulcan?" McCoy asked mildly. "You were unconscious, heaven only knows how badly hurt... I couldn't see straight much less think clearly, and when Spock says get out in that tone of voice, I get out."

Kirk had stopped pacing as McCoy spoke and was standing with his hands on his hips, his anger not lessened, but understanding what McCoy was saying. "He shouldn't have come back for me in the first place. I told him to go. He jeopardized the possibility of our finding the ambassador..."

"Don't yell at me, Jim," McCoy said plaintively. "I'll bet my head hurts even more than yours does. I also suggest you sit down before you fall down. It's only anger that's keeping you on your feet in the first place."

Kirk glared at him but sat down without voicing a protest.

"Thank you," McCoy said gratefully.

Spock's arrival interrupted anything Kirk might have said. He was limping slightly and his shirt was torn and bloody. A huge bruise covered the left side of his face.

"My god, Spock!" McCoy started as he rose to his feet.

"I am quite all right, Doctor," Spock said quickly. "Are you, Jim?"

"I'm fine," Kirk said. "What happened?"

"Those men were far more interested in you than they were in me. A couple held me back while the others tried to track you here. I was somewhat hampered by having to deal with a few at a time and then being forced to catch up with the rest before they overtook you and the doctor."

Kirk stared at him for a minute. "I want McCoy to check you out, then I want to see you -- alone." Without waiting for an answer, he got up and walked out of the room.

"Take off what's left of your shirt, Spock, and let's see what you've been through. I won't even ask what the others look like..." He glanced at Spock to find him staring at the doorway that Kirk had just passed through. "I'd be worried too," he continued. "He's as mad as hell at you."

"He will see the logic of my actions," Spock said simply.

"You should live that long," McCoy muttered as he started wiping away blood.



"We have one reason for our mission here, to rescue the Andorian ambassador, not to save me. You had a direct order, Mister, and it wasn't to come back to get me! Kirk stood glaring at the Vulcan who was standing at attention in front of him, his eyes fixed on some part of the wall across the room. He had not moved or spoken since he had presented himself in front of Kirk some five minutes earlier. "Have you heard one word I've said to you, Spock?"

Spock's eyes refocused and moved to Kirk's face. "Would you prefer your words verbatim, or just have a general summary?" he asked innocently.

Kirk could not stop the smile from crinkling the corners of his mouth. "Your mother must have been tempted more than once to slam you up against a wall!" he said.

Spock's eyebrow rose. "I assure you, Captain, my mother would never consider doing such a thing."

"Then she's a better man than I am," Kirk said, causing Spock's other eyebrow to rise as high as the first. He sobered slightly. "From now on, Spock, I expect my orders, any orders, to be obeyed immediately and explicitly. Is that clearly understood?"

"Clearly, Captain."

"Good. That's settled then," Kirk said.

A tiny smile formed in Spock's mind. Kirk had asked him if he had understood -- he had not demanded that Spock say he would obey, leaving the Vulcan with a clear conscience: that he would not be disobeying Kirk if he did exactly the same thing all over again. "Is the Ambassador's son still here?" Spock asked, knowing it was time to change the subject before Kirk realized what he had said.

"He said that he had a lot of things to think about, but he assured me he'd be back." Kirk slowly sank down into a chair. His anger and fear over Spock's safety now gone, he was finally feeling the effects of the abuse his body had undergone. "Caton's behind this whole thing, Spock. Sharvas is a member of Caton's mercenaries. It was Caton's idea to kidnap Ambassador Shras and hold him for ransom."

"Why would the Andorians hire Caton to find the man he had kidnapped?"

"I'm still not sure that they did, at least not without some suggestion from Caton. I'm even more convinced than ever that Caton wants me for some reason and was prepared to go to any lengths to get me to play into his hands."

"McCoy said he was jealous."

Kirk looked at him. "He said the same thing to me. I've thought about it a lot since then, but I can't see any reason why he would be."

Spock walked the length of the room, then turned back to Kirk. "He is jealous of you because of who you are."

"Spock, you're not making much sense."

"Jim, I have studied the Human species, emotion rules your lives -- sometimes in good ways, sometimes not. Roaul Caton was a very capable cadet -- you were better. Sometimes that alone can destroy a man."

"I didn't do anything..."

"You didn't have to. He did it all himself. Quite possibly he had been the brilliant achiever all his life, the student that no one else could touch. Then he ran into you, someone as brilliant and as talented as he was. He couldn't handle it, so he broke." Spock paced the room for a few minutes longer. "That is past history," he said, once again turning towards Kirk. "It is the present we must now worry about. I believe he will allow us to rescue the Ambassador, but the price of that rescue will be your life."

Kirk stared at him for a moment. "I don't much like your reasoning."

A slight smile touched Spock's face. "Neither do I, but we must be ready for that demand because, most assuredly, it will be made."

"Since I haven't heard any phaser fire from in here, I take it you two have settled your differences," came McCoy's voice from the doorway. He looked closely at the two of them as he walked into the room. "You both need sleep -- it hasn't been a good day for either of you. No argument, Spock, you are not perfectly all right. You look worse

than Jim. At least he doesn't have a green eye. You two can finish saving the universe tomorrow..."



When Kirk woke the next morning, he found Spock was already up. McCoy was still sleeping peacefully so Kirk dressed as quietly as he could and crept out. He found Spock in the large main room along with the small Andorian they had met in the dark bar the day before.

"Good morning, Captain Kirk," the youth said, extending his hand. "I apologize for the mess I have caused."

Kirk shook hands. "This isn't the first time you've been in trouble from what I hear," he said, his frank gaze causing the Andorian to drop his eyes.

"No, I'm afraid it is not." He looked back at Kirk. "But it will be the last, that I swear."

"Quite a change of heart for a rebel," Kirk commented.

"If I may be allowed to explain," Sharvas said. "Last night I did a lot of thinking. All of us were in grave danger yesterday -- those men would have killed anyone who got in the way. You knew what your fate would be, yet you were willing to exchange your life for our freedom." He looked at Spock for a minute, and the Vulcan nodded slightly. Sharvas looked back at Kirk. "This morning I had the opportunity to talk with Mr. Spock. He said you came after my father out of a sense of duty, that no one ordered you, nor paid you. May I ask why?"

Kirk's eyes shifted to Spock who met his gaze steadily but said nothing. Finally he looked back at the Andorian. "I had a responsibility. A lot of innocent people were in danger because of your actions. You also have a responsibility to people you don't even know just because of who your father is. I know it's not fair, but you'll find not much of life is. We show our maturity by accepting what we cannot change."

The Andorian stared at him. "You are not responsible for the Andorian people."

"I am a representative of Starfleet -- anyone under Federation law is also under my protection. It's my job to find your father."

The Andorian shook his head. "No, it is your sense of morality which made you come at such grave risk to your own life." He looked down at the floor for a minute, then back up at Kirk. "I have always worshiped men like Roaul Caton because they were brave enough to rebel. I see now, and by his actions concerning you and my father, that it is not bravery but selfishness. Thank you for showing me that, Captain."

Kirk smiled slightly. "I trust you will be able to say that to your father shortly." He looked at Spock. "Any word?"

"I brought a message from Caton with me," Sharvas said, holding out a piece of paper.

Kirk took it and read it in silence, then looked up. "I seem to be a very popular person around here."

"Of course you cannot meet those terms," Spock said quietly.

"Remember what we talked about yesterday, Spock?"

The Vulcan nodded. "Roaul Caton is out to destroy you, Jim, those others were not. I am sure that with Sharvas' help, it will be possible to rescue Ambassador Shras without giving up your own freedom as Caton demands."

Kirk looked down at the paper that demanded he give himself over to Caton in exchange for the Andorian ambassador. "Well, I'm willing to try anything, but if it does come down to this, Spock, I will do it, and this time there will be no interference from you, is that clear?"

"Quite clear, sir," Spock said quietly. And there is no way I will ever allow Roaul Caton to break you, he thought. By all the ancient gods, I swear it.

"Okay, where's the coffee?" came McCoy's voice from behind them. He looked at the assembled group. "Looks like this side lost," he commented. "That's quite a shiner you've got there, Spock. Can you see anything out of that eye?"

"It is quite functional, thank you, Doctor. The coffee is over there and still warm, I believe."

"Have a seat, Bones. I'll get us both a cup," Kirk offered. "Sharvas, would you like some?"

"Thank you, I would."

As Kirk handed out the mugs of coffee, there was no mistaking the tremor in his hands -- a silent reminder of the pain that was coursing through him -- pain that went unspoken in any other way save the pale and drawn face and the black smudges under his eyes. McCoy thought briefly of saying something more, then decided against it. It wouldn't do any good.

"So," Kirk said as he sat down. "Caton is behind this whole mess." He looked at Spock. "I want him. He's flaunted authority for too long. If he wants to hate me, I'm really going to give him a reason to do it."

McCoy's eyebrow lifted. "That's a tall order, Jim. The three of us going against whatever organization Caton's got on this planet?"

"Four," Sharvas said quietly. "Five, if we successfully rescue my father. He is a fierce fighter, and now he's got a good reason to fight."

"That's still not very many," McCoy grumbled into his coffee.

"It might be enough, though," Kirk said, his eyes lighting up.

"You have a plan?" Spock asked.

"You bet I do," Kirk said with a grin, "and it is Caton who's going to make it work!"



Caton looked up in surprise as the door burst open and Kirk was flung bodily to the floor in front of him. His hands bound in front of him caused Kirk to land awkwardly. A hard push from Sharvas' foot left him face down and gasping to catch his breath.

"It must have been quite a fight," Caton commented, looking at Sharvas' torn clothing.

"The Vulcan is dead. The other Human will give us no trouble." He stared at Caton. "I promised him I would bring my father. If we don't, Starfleet will be down our necks before we have a chance to move. Kirk made McCoy swear that he would say both he and the Vulcan died while trying to rescue my father -- providing my father is released; otherwise he will tell the truth."

Caton stared at Sharvas for a few minutes, then stepped over to Kirk and yanked his head up by the hair. "I want the truth, Kirk," he said viciously.

Kirk swung his feet around and caught Caton behind the back of the knees, felling him like a giant oak tree. As Caton went down, Kirk pushed himself to his feet. "I don't lie, Caton," he said as he looked down at the man, "but don't touch me again before the Ambassador is free, and Sharvas comes back to tell us."

Hatred shone out of Caton's eyes as he slowly got up. "You're a dead man, Kirk," he said.

Kirk said nothing but stood with bound hands and a steady gaze, and Caton found himself backing away from the man who was supposed to be his prisoner.

"Go to Wagner," Caton said to Sharvas. "He will help take your father to the Fed."

"I will need more than Wagner," Sharvas said. "You have seen how my father fights. He does not give in like the Starfleet does."

"Take whatever means you need," Caton snapped. "Just get back here fast," he added, picking a phaser up from the table. "I have work to do on this little play thing here, and I don't like to wait."

Sharvas took a quick, worried glance at Kirk, then nodded. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Kirk gave a little smile, knowing full well to whom Sharvas was talking.

"Wipe that smile off your face, Kirk," Caton said as Sharvas left. "You're not in charge any longer. You're dead meat."

Kirk stared at him but said nothing, and there was no change in the smile.

"I've waited years for this," Caton said. "You were always everyone's favorite -- the wonder boy. I worked my butt off and no one ever noticed. It was always you and your glorious accomplishments. I swore years ago you would grovel at my feet like I was forced to grovel at yours. I'm going to hear you scream for mercy, and I'm going to give you the same as you gave me -- none."

Kirk's eyes narrowed a little, but still he said nothing.

"Damn you, don't you stare at me with that superior smirk!" Caton's hand whipped out and the phaser cracked on the side of Kirk's head. Kirk fell backwards, his bound hands affording him no protection from the fall. His head struck hard against a chair behind him. He lay still for a moment, the room whirling circles around him.

"That was once too often, Mr. Caton," came a familiar voice from the doorway. "I have already told you about Vulcan emotion and what is involved."

"You're dead!" Caton said. "Sharvas told me you were dead!"

"A Vulcan is hard to kill, Caton," Kirk said as he pushed his way back to his feet, using the chair heavily for support. He felt slightly sick, and the heavy fall had been enough of a shock to his system to start the tremors running through his body again. He held tightly onto the chair and forced himself to focus his eyes. "I would drop that phaser, Caton," he went on. "If Spock is standing in front of you, you can be sure that McCoy and Sharvas aren't far away. You can die now, if you wish, or you can come with us."

"My men far outnumber yours," Caton said.

"Not any longer," Sharvas said from a different entrance. "You allowed me to take as many as I felt I needed. I left them with my father, so you have some idea of what their present status is."

Caton lifted the phaser toward Kirk. "I'm not letting you free this time, almighty Captain."

"I would not advise you continue your actions any further," Spock said quietly.

Caton glanced at him for a second. "Your bond again, Spock?"

"If you wish."

"Then watch me sever it!"

"Jim, down -- fast!" McCoy's voice and body flattened Kirk before he had a chance to think. A brilliant flash lit the room, then everything went black.



"Why is it that I'm in bed, and you're not?" Kirk grumbled at McCoy.

"Because I'm a doctor and you're a patient," McCoy shot back, "and I haven't been hit by phaser stun every time I turn around, nor have I been beaten and kicked around as much as you." He grinned. "Feeling up to a visitor? Ambassador Shras would like to talk to you."

"Anything's better than lying here staring at the ceiling."

The Andorian hesitantly moved into the room. "I trust I am not disturbing you, Captain."

"Not at all," Kirk said with a smile.

"I would like to thank you first of all for my rescue..." "

"You should not be thanking me, sir, but your son. He had far more to do with it than I did."

The Andorian nodded slightly. "That was the second and more important reason I had to thank you, Captain Kirk. Family is very important to the Andorian race, and you have given me back the son I thought I had lost." He looked at Kirk for a moment. "Your First Officer told Sharvas that you have done essentially the same thing for him -- there had been a rift with his father also..."

Kirk shifted his position, a bit embarrassed by the Andorian's words. The movement caused his muscles to start trembling again. "Damn," he muttered. "Don't go around getting hit by a phaser if you can avoid it. It can be a real nuisance."

"I'll try to avoid it," the Andorian said with a smile. "Well, Captain, I must not tire you, so I shall take my leave. I trust I shall have a chance to talk with you again once you are up and around." He bowed politely, then left.

As he walked out of the room, Kirk gave in to the tremors and curled up in a ball of pain. He was lying like that when Spock arrived.

"I shall call McCoy."

"No, I'll be all right in a few minutes," Kirk said, his teeth tightly clenched together. "What's our status?"

"We have made contact with the Enterprise and should rendezvous with them in 17.2 hours, provided Mr. Scott maintains the warp speed he vowed he would. As this shuttle has no brig, Mr. Caton has been restrained in the rear cargo section, and by the amount of noise coming from that area, I would assume he is not happy."

"That's probably putting it mildly," Kirk said. He looked at Spock. "You took a pretty big chance back there. Caton's phaser was set to kill."

"I was at little risk, Jim," Spock replied. "It was you he wanted to kill. McCoy was in position right behind you before either Shravas or myself made ourselves known. My only concern was not making Caton angry enough before he fired the phaser."

"I don't follow you."

"If he lost control of his emotions, he could no longer control his physical actions. His aim would be as wild as his mood and therefore far more likely to miss a moving target. McCoy was directed to get you into a different position fast, which he did, causing Caton's phaser to miss by a good bit."

Kirk lay silent for a moment. "Caton spoke of a bond he was going to sever..." He rubbed a hand across his forehead. "It was just before I passed out..." He raised puzzled eyes to the Vulcan.

"It was something I tried to explain to Mr. Caton earlier," Spock said quietly, "and something he will never understand."

"Jim, good god, why didn't you call me?" McCoy appeared behind Spock, his eyes blazing as he saw the shaking Human. "Why the hell won't you ever admit to a little discomfort? You're going to kill yourself someday playing the martyr!" He grabbed a hypo and pressed it against Kirk's shoulder.

Within seconds, the room started to grow fuzzy, and the pain less sharp. Then Kirk was asleep.

"Damn fool," McCoy muttered as he watched the pain indicator start to fall. He looked at Spock. "You should have called."

"He did not wish it."

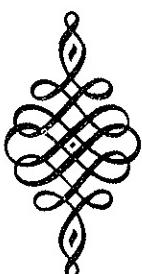
McCoy stared at him for a minute. "You're as bad as he is, like two kids in cahoots with each other!" He placed his hand on Kirk's pulse. "Well, he's going to sleep for a while, and I'm going to do the same." He rested his hand on Kirk's forehead for a moment. "God, I'll be glad when I can get back to the Enterprise and give him some proper treatment."

After McCoy had gone, Spock gently took Kirk's wrist and felt the strong pulse for himself, much steadier now that McCoy's medication was taking hold. He gazed at the sleeping Human and thought of what he had told Caton, words that Caton would never understand, words that would never need to be said between this man and himself. Through all the trials, through the Elba II's and the Roaul Catons, as long as Spock was alive, the precious vulnerability that made Kirk the man he was would be carefully guarded.

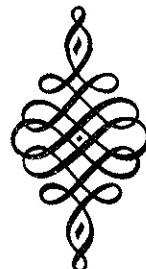


TRIUMVIRATE

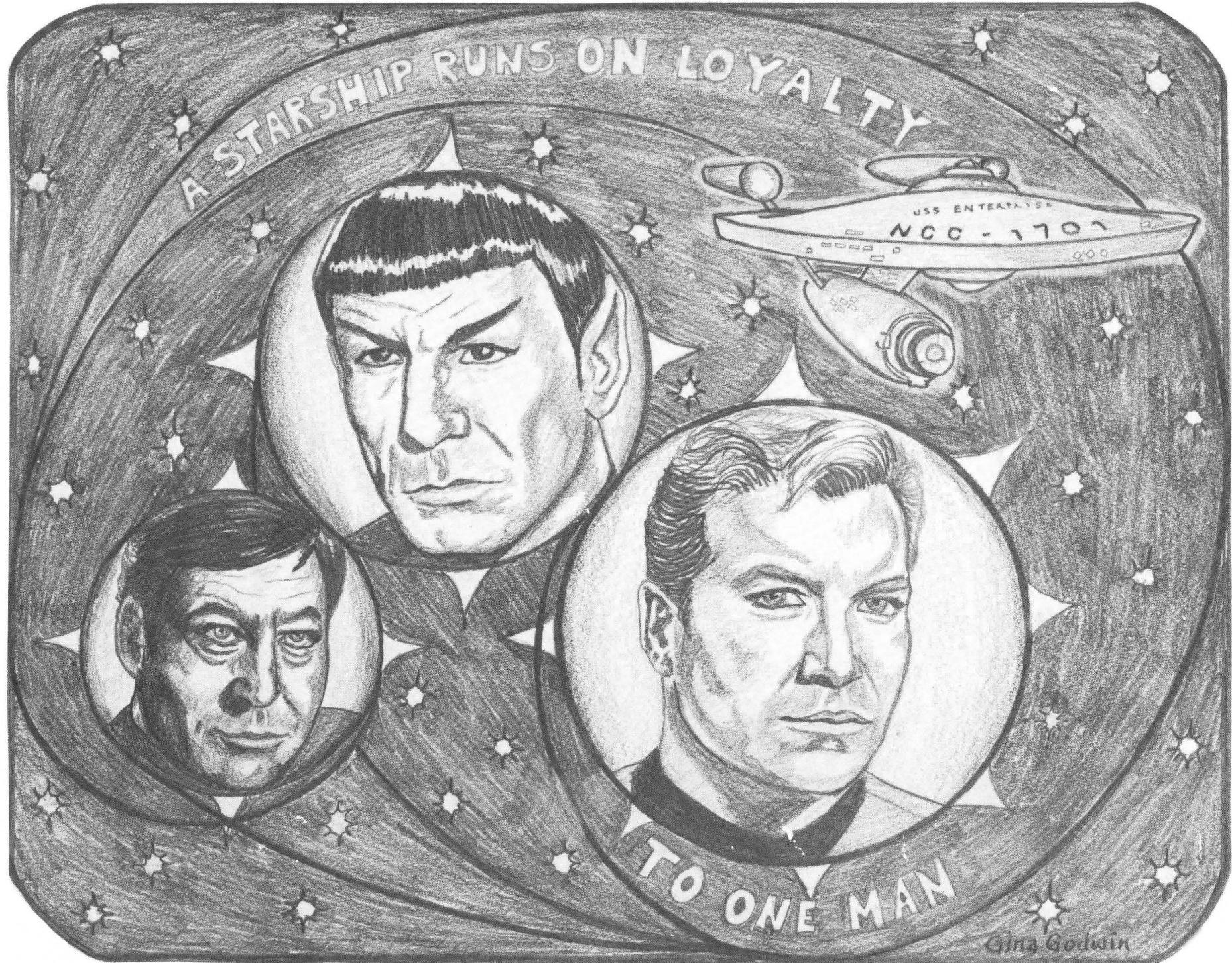
By: Gloria DeLeon



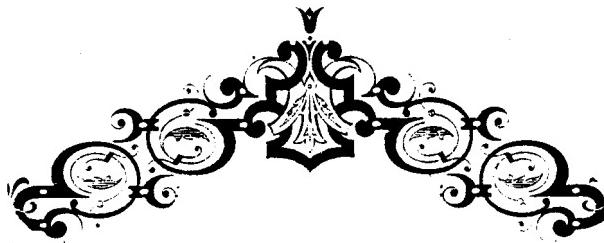
Friendship's memories live on...
Even after friends are gone.
Love teaches lessons that never die --
Lessons you can never buy;
For all we have is one another:
Only this: friend or brother.
Naught, but life, has any man to share:
Nor anything, but love, to dare.
Friendship's role is no light game;
All that you have to give, love will claim.
Is your heart brave for the dance?
Pay the Piper: take your chance.
Whatsoever you decide to do --
That becomes a part of you.



Some things can never die --
This we know: You... and I.



Gina Godwin



Anachronisms

"Captain... a starship also runs on loyalty to one man,
and nothing can ever replace it or him."

I look at you, see the absolute faith and trust in your
eyes... My throat aches with long-suppressed emotion and I
cannot speak. The moment is almost too intense to bear.

If indeed M-5 is the wave of the future, and we are
but throwbacks, anachronisms...

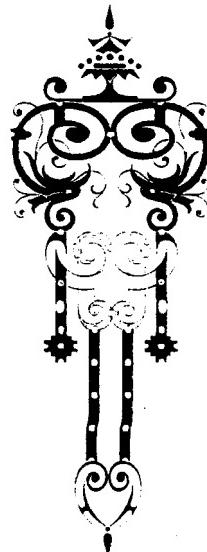
Somewhere there is a frontier where machines are
still useful servants, where friendship and loyalty count,
where love and compassion aren't obsolete words.

Somewhere there is a place for anachronisms like you
and I, my friend...

... and I'll take you there.

By: Laurel Ridener & Lynn Syck

Art: Gina Godwin



S Warmth S

By: Jan Davies



He traded the heat of Vulcan
For Earth's erratic seasons
Cool summers, gelid winters
At Star Fleet Academy
And the chill corridors of a star ship
Always cold -- constantly maintain internal controls

He left the soothing heat of Vulcan's sands
The incandescence of her sun on his face at noon
For a home among Humans
Inside the Enterprise -- hielal home -- 25 C
Optimum for Human comfort and efficiency
The chill penetrates the tunic

In his stateroom
Temperature set at 52 C
Relaxation of internal controls
The brief luxury of perspiration

Two years ago
A visit home
He embraced his native sun
Pores absorbing her fiery heat

He left Vulcan before his leave was complete
Fleeing a cold more glacial than any terran winter
His benumbed people
Frigid, except for their septennial fevers
Then neatly tucking away
Souls into crystalline structures

Back on the Enterprise
--still cold as always--
Yet -- somehow, more habitable
Not logical -- Nevertheless...
Possible to spend time in recreation facilities
Which is propitious
Because the Captain plays a worthy game of chess

Something about this new Captain
He radiates a quality
He wins with a smile... He loses with a smile
A smile that could melt a Vulcan

It had been a reasonable concession
To give up the heat of Vulcan
For the chill of a star ship
For the first time in his life
He had found warmth.



JD



baptism by fire

By: Ginger Dawson

Art: Mary Mills

McCoy felt as though they had been walking for miles -- often stumbling, and sometimes half crawling -- they supported each other every painstaking step of the way. He raised a weary head to glare angrily at the bloody red orb that was the Drayon sun just peeking over the jagged horizon. His eyes hurt from straining to see in the unaccustomed red hazy light and his head throbbed from some unknown subliminal source. Damn this mission anyhow, McCoy thought savagely. And damn that malfunctioning shuttlecraft for causing us to crash land on this god-forsaken planet with a sun that didn't even offer enough damn light to see by!

A soft moan from his companion brought McCoy back to reality. "I know Spock. I'm tired and hurting too. It'll be light soon and then maybe things won't look so bleak."

The Vulcan moaned again, stirring restlessly. "No." Came a mournful plea as Spock began struggling to disengage from McCoy's supportive embrace.

"Dammit Spock, hold still! I'm too damn tired for this!" But the Vulcan broke free of the protesting human anyway and almost immediately crumbled to his knees in the sand, clasping both hands over his ears as if trying to shut out some unbearable racket. "No!" He cried again and shook his head violently.

McCoy stared mutely at him for a brief instant, concerned and perplexed. "Spock," he said, kneeling beside the Vulcan. "What is it? What's wrong?" He placed a gentle hand on the trembling blue-clad shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" Spock roared and blindly backhanded the doctor with such unbridled force that resulted in McCoy lying flat on his back several feet away, desperately fighting off unconsciousness. As his head cleared he could hear Spock moaning over and over, "I apologize... I can't block... I'm sorry..."

Tired, aching, and now having a monster of a headache, McCoy did not even bother to try standing, but made his way back to the Vulcan on hands and knees. He was careful this time not to physically touch the distraught figure. "Spock, what is it?" McCoy queried anxiously. "What's happening to you?"

With an obvious effort, Spock rallied, managing tenuous control and said, "Telepathic... scrambling... this planet... the sun..." His own bleary eyes squinted at the sun now clearly visible over the irregular mountains, casting fiery streaks of red-orange

color in the sky's dawn. Spock regained control and in a tired rote he continued, "There are, on record, planets of this type; planets having flux combinations of gravitational, radiation and other unstable emissions. Such planets are not suitable to sentient lifeforms because the flux emissions disrupt and scramble mental functions. In humans and similar beings the resulting interference causes an acute drug-like state, impairs reasoning etc. In telepathic races..." His voice trailed off. "... Eventual insanity."

"Oh my god." McCoy whispered. So that was the unnamed itch he had felt since they first entered the planet's orbit. McCoy had wondered at the first officer's almost violent reluctance to land the disabled shuttle on Drayon, wanting instead to chance manipulating the crippled ship through space on the hope (Spock? Hope?) that their emergency transmission would be intercepted and they rescued. Then McCoy thought angrily. Damn Vulcan. If he had told me this would happen, maybe I would have preferred to chance running out of air in space. Some choice! Even McCoy, a nontelepath, could now feel the buzzing vibrations in his skull. Poor Spock. It must be worse for him.

"There must be something we can do." McCoy offered hopefully. Spock shook his head, rubbing at his temples with both hands.

Spock once again used his will to gain control over outside forces. "Already my barriers are being obliterated. I cannot shield. Your thoughts and emotions are being received at a much distorted intensity. I cannot control the pain of my injuries sustained in the crash, nor can I shut out yours. The sensory input is overloading my mind." He sighed heavily and again looked at the Drayon sun. It was climbing higher in the red hazed sky. "When the sun reaches its zenith, I will go mad." Spock said with bone chilling calmness and certainty.

Oh my god, McCoy thought. "There's got to be some way to negate the effect. Listen to me Spock. I'm not going to just sit here and watch you crack up. Now listen up. It appears the intensity of the effect is related to the sun, correct?" Spock, who had closed his eyes and was again rubbing his temples, simply nodded.

"Then if we could blot out the sun, the effect wouldn't be so intense and you may be able to cope, right?"

Spock squinted at the doctor, pain evident by the expression on his face. His control was ebbing by degree. He demanded, "And just how do you suppose we 'blot out the sun' Doctor?"

McCoy's temper was also on a short fuse. He responded testily. "Not the actual sun you idiot!" (Some part of McCoy's mind took note of the seeming incongruity of him calling Spock, the walking encyclopedia, an idiot. Well, no time for such reflections now.) "Look over there." He pointed to a large mountain range ahead of them. "I bet there are caves in those mountains. Deep caves. We could shelter there. At least a major portion of the sun's radiation would be blocked, and we could find some way of coping with whatever intensity of the effect still penetrated into the cave." He looked expectantly at the first officer who appeared to be waging a losing battle trying to maintain some measure of control over his beleaguered senses.

Not waiting for a response, McCoy hauled the Vulcan to his feet and propelled him in the direction of the mountains. It was the longest three mile walk of McCoy's life. Spock faltered frequently, but every time McCoy tried to assist him the Vulcan cried out as if burned. It was a race against time; and the timekeeper was the Drayon

sun. When they reached the leading edge of the rocky mountains, McCoy unslung his tricorder and scanned for caves. Thank God, he thought.

"Spock! Come on, we've made it! There's an opening to a deep cave just over there!" He turned to look at his companion. Spock had fallen to the ground, hands to his head, obviously under torment from the growing effect of the sun. "Dear God." McCoy exclaimed and went to him, but remembered not to touch him. Damn! He thought savagely. I can't help him. I can't even touch him! Putting as much force into his voice as he could, McCoy snapped at the Vulcan.

"Spock. Spock! Pull yourself together dammit! We're almost there. Come on, get yourself together." And with that McCoy slapped him across the face. Hard. Spock quieted. "Now come on." McCoy commanded. "Let's get out of the sun." Grabbing the Vulcan's shirt the doctor again tugged him to his feet. Swaying unsteadily, Spock looked at McCoy's face. The human winced at the naked pain and confusion he saw in the Vulcan's glazed and pleading eyes.

"McCoy, there is a danger."

"Yeah, yeah." McCoy answered impatiently, trying to prod the Vulcan into motion.

"Listen to me!" Spock pleaded. The desperation in his voice made McCoy stop. "I'm losing control." He said flatly. McCoy started to interrupt, but was cut off by a savage gesture. "I could become dangerous. I could hurt you... kill you." Trying to reassure his friend, McCoy smiled tiredly.

"Spock, you wouldn't -- you couldn't -- hurt a fly. Come on. Once we're out of the sun you'll feel much better. We both will."

"Don't you understand!" Spock pleaded. "You'll be trapped in that cave with me!"

McCoy stared into the Vulcan's nearly crazed eyes, willing sanity to penetrate into them. "I'll take that risk Mr. Spock." He said clearly. "Now come on before you do collapse." Spock shook his head sadly, resigned, and lead McCoy towards the cave.

The cave was dark, cold and damp. Feeling his way through the blackness, McCoy took them deep into the cave. Exhausted, he finally sank to his knees and commanded, "Sit down Spock before you fall down." After a long silence the doctor asked. "Is it any better for you in here Spock?"

"The effect has been lessened somewhat Doctor." Came the flat response. "However, the Drayon sun is not yet at its zenith and maximum output of flux emission. When it is I fear..." He did not continue.

"You know, a little more optimism on your part would go a long way in making this a more bearable unbearable situation, Mr. Spock." McCoy chided. Only silence answered him. Later he would come to wish for that quiet again. For, as Spock had predicted, the effect did indeed get worse, and the cave was filled with the sounds of both men's misery. McCoy realized Spock had been gradually losing control over his thoughts -- his manner -- but he was not prepared for what was yet to come. Finally, pushed beyond all limits of endurance, Spock screamed his agony.

"Spock!" McCoy shouted. Disoriented himself, the human made his way over to the Vulcan, who lay convulsing in torment. "Spock." He called again, reaching to restrain the thrashing form. At his first touch, the Vulcan howled in mindless rage and attacked. The hot viselike grip at the human's throat was nothing compared to the searing walls of flame that ripped into McCoy's mind. This was the living hell the Vulcan had so feared. A blazing inferno of the mind. The fire enveloped and consumed, licking at every corner of his mind. There was no spot, no place, no memory, no thought that escaped the questing flames. It burned body, mind and soul. And when there was nothing left to feed upon, the fire turned upon itself, rather like a black hole, consuming time, space, even light itself.

I'm so sorry, came a small and sad thought, it too laced with flame. Forgive me. And then there was nothing.



McCoy opened his eyes, but only after what seemed to be an eternity of floating aimlessly in some nowhere void. At last, the universe righted itself and McCoy was aware of himself and a world around him. The last remnants of red haze slowly faded away, and his eyes focused on the concerned face of James Kirk.

"Jim?"

"Yeah, it's me. How do you feel?"

Allowing his gaze to wander leisurely around the room, McCoy thought, Sickbay. God, it never looked so good. "It's hard to think." He complained, rubbing at his temples.

"Take it easy. You had us worried there for a while, but you're going to be fine." Kirk punctuated the last with a gentle squeeze of his friend's shoulder.

McCoy met Kirk's gaze, and both men smiled. The moment ended abruptly as memory fell into place and McCoy sat boltright up in bed, panic plain in his eyes as he exclaimed, "Spock! Jim, what about Spock?"

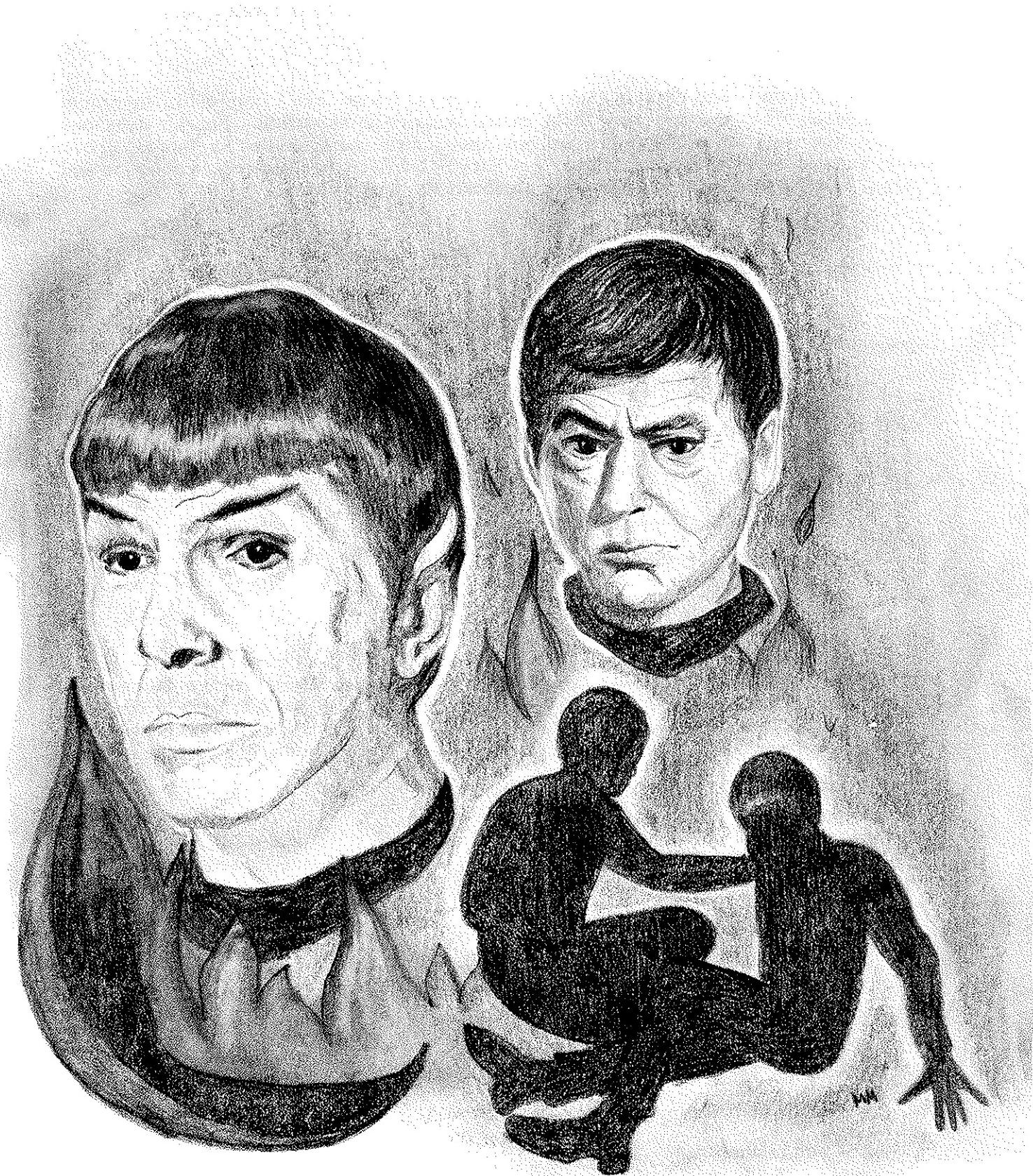
"Easy, Bones." Kirk attempted to calm the Doctor. "He's in the next room." Despite the reassuring words, Kirk could not hide the troubled concern in his face. McCoy started off the bed.

"You're in no condition to get up." Kirk reprimanded.

"Shut up and help me, or get out of the way. One or the other!" With a supportive arm around the doctor, Kirk aided McCoy up and into the adjoining room.

The diagnostic bed showed Spock's vital signs to be strong and steady. However, McCoy knew the damage he feared most would not be reflected in physical diagnostics. Moving to stand beside the unconscious Vulcan, flashes of memory returned to him. The mad flames of insanity, engulfing them, searing their minds, forging them together in a hell neither could have survived alone. But perhaps together...

"Spock." McCoy called softly, then repeated the name louder. There was no response. Then, a flutter of eyelid movement and slowly the Vulcan's eyes opened. McCoy's immediate joy quickly gave way to despair, because the dark eyes were vacant.



"No," he whispered. Grabbing the Vulcan's shoulders firmly, the doctor shook him frantically. "Dammit Spock, it can't end like this!" Kirk moved to restrain McCoy, but the doctor had already released Spock and now turned with stricken eyes to Kirk.

"I... couldn't help him, Jim." It was almost an appeal.

"Ah, Bones." The captain sighed, and drew his friend into a comforting embrace. A quiet moan from the bed drew both men's immediate attention. Spock's eyes had closed. However, when they soon opened again, awareness kindled in them. Spock sought out and his eyes focused upon -- not Kirk -- but McCoy. They held confusion and vistages of deep pain; but the eyes were obviously no longer vacant.

"Spock!"

"Doctor." Came the weak response.

"Just rest easy. I have some idea of the disorientation you must be experiencing. It'll pass."

Rubbing gingerly at his temples, Spock complained. "My barriers... I can't..."

"I know." McCoy soothed. "Don't worry about that now, okay?" Spock gave up trying to speak. It was too taxing, but he did nod his head. Satisfied, McCoy moved to withdraw.

"Doctor." The Vulcan managed to call weakly.

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

At a loss for words, McCoy smiled at him. Slowly Spock reached out a hand, extending it in an obvious gesture. McCoy stared at the proffered hand a moment -- Vulcans did not touch casually -- then reached out to clasp the hand in both of his own. Because of Spock's weakened shielding ability, the Vulcan's thoughts filtered gently into McCoy's mind; and for a brief moment each shared once again flashes of their shared ordeal.

I saw things in your mind Spock.

As I did in yours Doctor. A comfortable, tentative silence flowed through their mental link.

You know something Mr. Spock?

?

You're not such a bad character after all.

Nor are you.

Sleep well Spock.

And you Leonard.

When McCoy was back in his own bed again, Kirk regarded him a moment, then ventured tentatively. "Something monumental must have happened down there." McCoy had a distant, faraway look in his eyes. He could still see the raging flames of insanity in his mind's eye; but the fire could no longer harm him.

"Yeah." McCoy responded in a distracted fashion. Then shrugging off the mood he yawned sleepily, settling down for some much needed sleep.

"Call it a baptism Jim -- a baptism by fire."

Kirk did not understand, but he knew when not to pry. He smiled, for as far as he was immediately concerned, all was right with the universe. He had both of his dear friends back.



THE COMMANDER

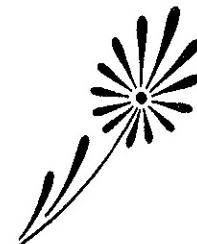


I looked into your eyes
and dared not yield to what I'd heard.
To touch your cheek,
to hold your hand,
I had only to say that single word.

You smiled at me,
sweet hope shining in those telling eyes.
Your proud soul bared to me,
the gift of a thousand starry skies.

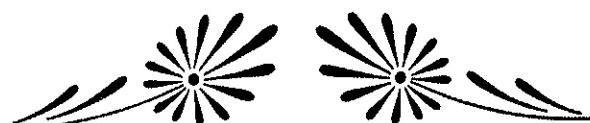
But you nodded slowly in silent farewell,
and I turned from you to my chosen hell.

I could not say the word to draw you near --
You could not hear.



And our worlds ended
in the space of a single tear.

By: Lynn Syck &
Laurel Ridener





WHO MOURNS

By: Lynn Syck and

The aging actor laughed awkwardly as they made the final adjustments to his spacesuit.

"I'm all thumbs," he said, and raised his heavily gloved hands.

The technicians around him laughed -- the actor's sense of humor was legend and he had kept them all in stitches the entire period of testing, training and pre-flight weed-outs.

His dedication had astounded them. Although in superb physical condition, he was over 50, and the attendant hazards of the flight had worried everyone. His death, no matter how accidental, would be a loss suffered by millions and his talents could never be replaced. But he had persevered, earning the much-sought-after "Arts" chair in the upcoming space flight, earning the grudging respect and approval of even the worst skeptic.

The space shuttle loomed before them in the distance, cold and aloof in her arrogant beauty, foreboding to those who did not know her. But he knew her, welcomed the change to become intimate with her.

"Ready?" the Flight Doctor asked, interrupting his thoughts, rapping a gloved knuckle on his helmet -- he nodded -- and the doctor grinned. "All right, then. Once around the block."

Aboard the shuttle, everything was as it should be, and the activity took on an air of forced routine as weeks of intense training took over.





FOR ADONAI'S?

Laurel Ridener

The countdown proceeded on schedule and the launch was spectacularly flawless -- smooth and beautiful beyond the actor's wildest expectations.

He had thought space would be silent, but it was filled with music, filled with the symphony of the stars.

He loosened his safety harness and drifted to the large ports, letting his hand rest lightly on the glass.

And stared.

Stars, space, infinity...His throat ached and he rapidly blinked away the stinging in his eyes. So beautiful, so familiar in its welcoming glory...

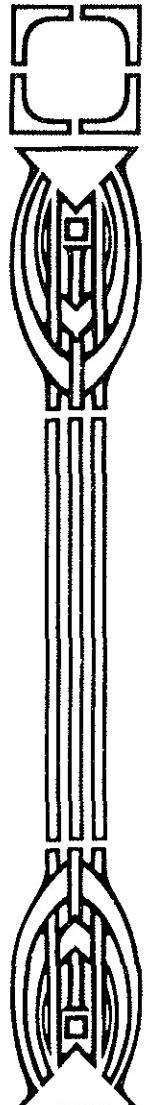
"Spock..." he whispered, "can you hear me?"

The Flight Doctor looked at the other astronauts, exchanging worried glances. Rapture of the deep? they all thought at once.

"Spock... I'm ready."

The Flight Doctor loosened his own safety harness aiming his drift toward the actor. He reached out a tentative hand to steady the man and ease him back to his chair, but his hand never made the contact.

The aging actor turned, smiled and disappeared in a shimmer of golden sparkles....



Until the Fear



By: CinDe Deren & Diane Miskiewicz

Art by: TACS



Subsides

Consciousness was slow in returning. He was content to remain in the safe womb of oblivion, but sounds kept filtering through the haze; not that he could decipher any of them. The subliminal buzzing kept him vaguely aware; someone was there. With the return of his hearing, other senses began to function. Through closed eyelids, he sensed bright lights. He did not open his eyes, hoping he could again escape to the safety of sleep, or finally die, for that was preferable to awaking and facing reality. Maybe what had happened was all a dream, a nightmare from which he would be waking up. But the throb in his head reminded him that this was no dream. Oh, God, No. Please don't let it be. Let me wake up in my own quarters surrounded by all the good ol' familiar things. My wood carvings, my rocking chair, my bed with the handmade quilt from Aunt Jo that I can hide under so they can't get me. Spock! There's room in here for you, too! They won't find us. They won't do it anymore! The memories came back with a merciless rush and a moan escaped his lips. He squeezed his eyes shut even tighter.

Shut up, you fool, they'll hear you! Oh, it won't make any difference. They'll do what they want to me. Maybe this time they'll finish me off. I don't know anything. At least nothing that could hurt Starfleet. That mindgrinder just made me tell on myself... all the pain centers... how to hurt a man without killing him... a Vulcan, too. Leonard, you turned out to be one hell of a traitor after all. Traitor to yourself and the next poor devils they get hold of. Traitor... not that word... Don't want to think that.

Along with the throbbing headache, he became aware of the broken collarbone -- never treated since the first day of imprisonment -- the electrical burns on the soles of his feet, the recently cracked hipbone, the white hot pain covering most of his body. Naked under a light, cool sheet, he shivered. He felt a pressure against his arm and heard the hiss of a hypospray.

What now? Drugs? He moaned again, then felt a relaxing of tense muscles, and a numbing of the pain. What's this new ploy? Take away the pain just to tease? He heard soft footsteps and slowly tried to open his eyes. C'mon Len, be a man. Face them head on. You can still spit at em.

One eye refused to open. It was taped shut. He remembered it was the one that was cut when the guards beat him for refusing to leave Spock's fallen body. Spock! Is he dead now? He was certainly beyond hurting; probably beyond help anyway. Hope to God you're dead, Spock. Hope you finally made it.

McCoy opened his good eye, closing quickly at the sudden brightness. The light was immediately dimmed. Someone was still there, watching. Why don't they get on with it? He cautiously peered through the slitted lid, expecting to see the leer of the Klingon Inquisitor. Instead, he saw a young Vulcan, slight of build and dressed in a white, loose-fitting Healer's tunic. At his side stood another Vulcan, wearing the insignia of captain on a gold starfleet tunic. Romulans! Can't be Vulcan. Not here. The thought trailed off as he took in his surroundings. The room was a small version of his own sickbay. From what he could see beyond the Vulcan/Romulan, there were shelves of medical equipment and monitors above the other beds.

Something was said in a low voice, and McCoy turned, grimacing in a wasted effort to spit. He was too dry.

"Perhaps you did not hear me. I asked if you were experiencing any further difficulty. The K-3 indicator registers that you are no longer in pain." His facial expression was neutral, the tone of voice the same.

"Gggg..." McCoy's throat was also too dry for speech. The healer turned to reach for something at the bedside table and came back with a cup of liquid. He put one hand under McCoy's shoulders to raise him, and one eyebrow rose as McCoy flinched from his touch and broken lips clamped shut in refusal. The monitor registered the increase in blood pressure and pulse rate.

"Dr. McCoy, I am Healer Somm, this is Captain Sepal, and you are aboard the Vulcan space craft Cocat. This cup is filled with water only."

This is it, McCoy decided, If it's poison, it'll be my ticket out. I'll drink enough to do the job and he'll get the rest in his eye. The first sip was hesitant, his resolve shaken at the last minute. Then he was gulping convulsively, his body taking over with a logic of its own. When the cup was removed, he realized belatedly that he had swallowed every drop. Despite his resignation to suffer til the last, he felt amazingly better.

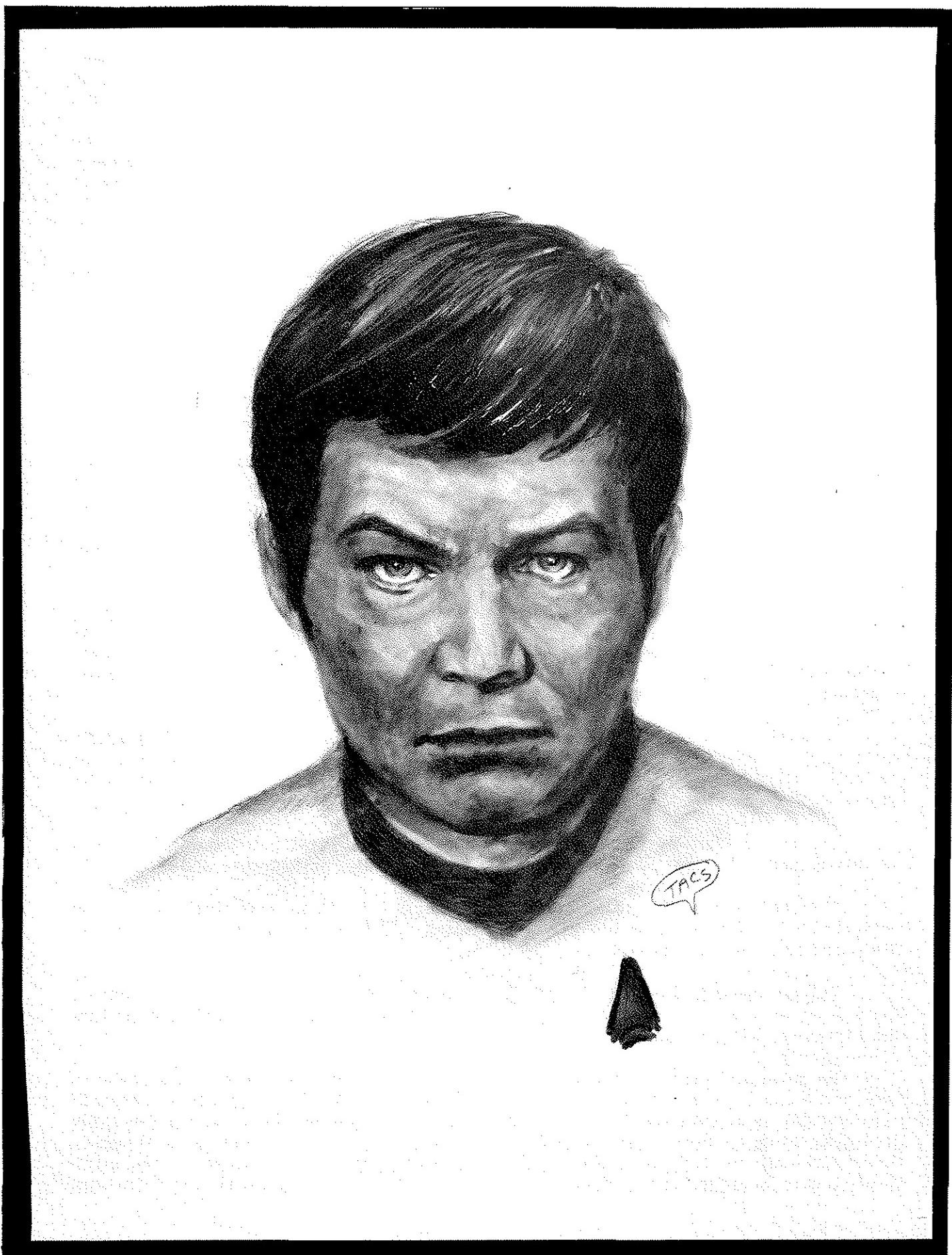
"Captain," he rasped. Stronger now, he could take the chance that this actually was a Vulcan. After six months as prisoner of the Klingons, after the horrible rape of the mind sifter, the deprivations, the beatings and humiliations, he dared hope the ordeal might be over.

The two Vulcans spoke to each other in a short conversation that McCoy could not understand. The captain nodded to something the healer said, turned and left.

"Do not speak. Captain Sepal will explain all when you are sufficiently recovered." The healer made one more adjustment to a tube, re-covered McCoy's bared chest, and followed the captain out.

Vulcan bastard! I need to know! Where is Spock? His last clear memory was of Spock lying on the cell floor, bleeding from a dozen places, and the guards pulling him away from the body, hitting him...

He tried to blank out the memories, forget the brutality. It was too much to take, too much for a man to suffer. I'm too old, too tired, too hurt. And if it is true, if I am rescued, then what was it all for? Spock is surely dead, so why can't I be? I think my mind's gone, so they might as well let the body go, too. He tossed as his thoughts floundered on. Wouldn't it be the final irony and torture to be rescued by the cold-blooded, hard-hearted, but oh so efficient Vulcan doctors. Who cares, anyway? No one,



certainly not the Vulcans. They probably find all my wounds 'fascinating'. The funniest part is... Spock didn't make it. He'd have loved being treated by Healer Somm. Did I say 'loved'? McCoy chuckled to himself. And soon he was consumed by gales of laughter, despite pain caused by the shaking tremors. His gasps for air set off an alarm over his bed, which only made him more hysterical. Somm entered the ward in a rush. At first, he thought his patient was undergoing a seizure, then stood in stunned silence as he watched the patient laugh and laugh... and cry and cry.

It was a change of shift in the sickbay when McCoy woke up. He remembered his hysteria and the hypo Somm had used to quiet him. Then the dreams had come, distorted dreams of his torment. His right eye searched for a means of calling a medic, someone who could defuse his memories, or distract him from them.

But why bother? What could I say that a Vulcan would want to hear? He lay, instead, feeling isolated, unable to turn back the assault of memories. The filthy cell shared with Spock, the vermin attracted by the lack of sanitation facilities, and the ever present sour odor of vomit permeating the small room. More often than not, the food had been inedible. But on the rare occasions they found no insect larva in the bowls they ate, only to lose the contents of their stomachs soon after because the Klingon food was nearly indigestible. They retained just enough to keep them alive.

He remembered the times they were forced to jog weakly in the exercise yard, a muddy plot between buildings also used as a crematory. The cold rain would beat on their naked bodies as the guards taunted their sexuality and races. He remembered the beatings and cruel interrogations, and begging over and over again for water to cleanse their wounds, their bodies, their cell. Six months of hell, and McCoy knew he would have a lifetime of memories.

Relieved to be distracted, he watched the staff that had just entered as they worked silently and efficiently, and followed their movements with his unbandaged eye as far as he could see. The Vulcans were busy tending a patient on his blind side. He heard them bustling in their no-nonsense way, and compared their procedure to his own fussing. I take that back... The way I USED to fuss. I won't be practicing medicine again. The Vulcans could repair his damaged body, but could not begin to heal his damaged soul.

He was jarred out of his reverie when Healer Somm hurriedly entered and went straight to the other patient's bed. Voices were raised, although they carried none of the tenseness that he would have heard in a human hospital. McCoy followed the conversations with clinical detachment.

"That patient is not maintaining the healing trance, Somm."

"Indeed, this is the second time he has tried to come out of it. His body requires a prolonged trance. I will attempt the healing meld again."

"Somm, he has rejected your attempts at a deep meld. There is danger to yourself if he draws you into his mind. We do not know how much damage has been done by the mind sifter, or if this aberration is a result of his human ancestry."

Human ancestry? Spock! McCoy turned his head carefully against the distant pain in his collarbone. The nurses moved to allow Somm to stand near the patient's head, and McCoy caught a glimpse of him. It was Spock.

"Healer, again I advise caution."

Somm positioned his fingers on Spock's face and asserted, "I am a Healer, and this needs to be done."

McCoy could detect no concern in the voice. After years of being Spock's doctor, he knew that, even though the stoic first officer would never admit it, concern contributed significantly to Spock's recovery. It's not up to me anymore. He'll have a better chance of survival with the Vulcans. What am I thinking? Spock, you don't want to recover. Sorry, old habits die hard.

Somm's eyes took on the faraway look that signaled a deep meld. At first it seemed to be progressing smoothly. Then his facial muscles began to twitch and he tightened his grip on his patient's head as Spock moaned and thrashed from side to side. Suddenly, Somm flew back to crash against McCoy's bed. He was panting heavily as he rose and went back to Spock, who was quiet now. Checking the monitors, the healer nodded approval with the readings.

"The patient has regained the healing trance," a nurse announced. McCoy turned away.

Why don't you let him be? Why are you forcing him to recover? The healer and nurse approached McCoy's bed.

"Do you require anything?"

Sure. How about a time trip through the Guardian? Seven months back ought to be the ticket. Then I can resign my commission and never have to see your faces at all. "Just some peace and quiet, if you think you can manage that. In my sickbay, we don't disturb other patients with Vulcan voodoo and unnecessary noises," he spat out violently.

The nurse's brow rose. "Wasn't this Spock's personal physician aboard the Enterprise?" he inquired in Vulcan.

Somm replied in kind. "Yes, he has managed to sustain Spock's health despite the difficulties inherent in hybrid physiology. I do not comprehend his lack of medical curiosity. However, understanding humans doesn't interest me, but I cannot always choose my patients." Nodding once, he left the ward.

McCoy stole one more glance at Spock before realizing he had achieved quiet but no peace. He remembered glaring Klingon faces, heard voices throwing questions he couldn't answer. He flinched at the almost audible sound of bones breaking. He closed his eyes to shut out the haunted look on Spock's face when he tended McCoy's wounds in the filthy cell. As he lay thinking he would never feel good again he remembered Spock, never giving up hope of rescue, constantly reminding him that Jim was coming, Jim would rescue them. And there were the horrible arguments when McCoy tried to understand how Spock could still look forward to a rescue after answering the inquisitor's questions. Spock always maintained his conscience was clear, but McCoy knew what he had heard. Even after these bitter exchanges, Spock still came to his defense against the brutal guards, only to receive beatings for the attempted heroism. The guards laughed as they beat the Vulcan senseless.

Emotionally raw from the abrasive memories of the many atrocities committed against both of them, McCoy forced himself back to the present. Disappointment in his

current situation for stalled the comfort he should have found here. This rescue didn't feel like the rescue Spock had used to lure him to survival. Where was their sympathy, the slaps on the back? The congratulations? And when he tried to deny these feelings of being cheated he would recollect Spock's denials that he was affected by their pain and degradation.

The memories exhausted him and he fell into a dream filled sleep, his state of mind an open wound in sleep as it was in waking.

McCoy awoke in a cold sweat and sensed that he was moving. He glanced around fearfully and saw he was surrounded by the Vulcan med team, who were holding the bottles attached to IV tubes and a portable monitoring system. His bed was being pushed through the ward and out into a corridor.

"Where in blazes are we going?" he tried to shout. His weak voice, achieving little more than a whisper, managed to raise brows all around.

"Your pardon for the disturbance, Doctor McCoy. We are taking you to private quarters so you will no longer be upset by the other patient," a nurse explained.

"Who says I need isolation? I get a little grouchy so you just sweep me under the rug. Why don't you just shove me down a disposal tube, then I won't make any more trouble."

Somm addressed his support staff. "It appears that this human's demands may be ignored. Note they are contradictory. Confine yourselves to following the medical regimen prescribed."

McCoy's jaw dropped but he was too demoralized to explain. His protest against being moved had been grounded in an almost instinctive disinclination to be separated from Spock. He watched the ceiling lights pass by. Soon, they reached their destination and left him alone.

Sure, run away, you cold-blooded devils. Don't stick around where you might get your ears ruffled by a deranged human. You young doctors think you know it all... can find a cure for every ill in your textbooks. Well, I'm no textbook case. They haven't written a chapter to cover what's wrong with me yet. I'm making medical history again. Only this time, instead of finding the cure, I'm the specimen. First sample of what's left when a human's been mind-sifted. Sorry, boy, you're not going to make your mark on the medical world curing me.

McCoy lay alone for what seemed like hours. He knew he was being monitored and only had to yell for someone to come. He told himself he was grateful for the solitude. Don't need anybody, much less Vulcans. I don't care what happens anymore. Spock is getting good care, the kind he always claimed he wanted. They'll have him up and around in no time without all the illogical hand holding that riles him. As for me, I just want to go home.

Home. The thought of the warm, comforting decks of the Enterprise came to mind; sickbay and the spot where he'd worn a dent in the floor beside Jim's command chair, manning his unofficial position on the bridge. He forced himself to think of Georgia. That was home, where no one had ever seen a Klingon or a mind sifter or a bowl of maggot infested gruel.

And he was off on another round of replaying memories of his captivity. This was to become a hated, yet irresistible form of self-stimulation. In the next days of largely undisturbed bedrest it would complicate the normal discomfort of recuperation with pounding headaches, digestive disorders and painfully cramped muscles. But it was all he had for company. Medics came and went in response to their dialogue with his monitors. They never needed to ask him how he felt. Where were those damned healers? He had a headache. What did they think he could do, turn it off like they could? Like Spock couldn't there at the end. He recalled Spock's attempts to enter a healing trance time and again. And the ever-present guards bursting into the cell to beat the Vulcan, pound him into unconsciousness. They took his Vulcan refuge from him and his Vulcan dignity. With the subsequent head injuries, Spock lacked the concentration to achieve trance, and soon gave up, settling for catching as much sleep as the guards would permit. McCoy had to sit by and watch, helpless, offering as much aid and comfort as he could. But behind his Vulcan mask, Spock protected himself the only way left to him.

Got to quit thinking. Doesn't do any good to mull it over again. Just gives me a damned headache.

The door slid open, admitting a medic who wordlessly administered a hypo. There was no need to ask what it was for. The pain in his head eased and McCoy was too grateful to chase the departing medic with his usual bolt of sarcasm. He felt so much better he even quipped to himself... Guess these monitors can be pretty handy, especially when the doctors are above chatting with the patients now and then to find out what's wrong first hand. Bet they never even heard of bedside manner.

Just as McCoy was affirming that the headache was gone, the door slid open again and the captain of the Vulcan ship entered. He was a tall, large-boned man, with a shock of almost pure white hair cut in roughish imitation of the sleek Vulcan style. His face was heavily lined, but his eyes were clear and piercing under the bushy, slanted brows. McCoy offered no greeting and the captain hesitated before coming to his bedside.

"Live long and prosper, Dr. McCoy."

He received a grunt in reply.

"I am Captain Sepal. You are on board the space craft Cocat. You were retrieved from the Klingon detention unit five solar days ago. Healer Somm will be in to inform you of the extent of your injuries. He assures me that you will recover completely."

McCoy winced and put his arm up over his eyes.

"Am I tiring you, Doctor? Perhaps it is too soon for your debriefing."

"Tired? Sure, I'm tired," McCoy snapped. "I'm tired of waiting until your Healer Somm decides I'm capable of finding out what I've been entitled to know all along." Somm thinks I'm recovering? Glad to hear I'm going to be physically fit when I lose all my marbles completely. "Don't get me wrong. Thanks for the rescue, but you needn't have bothered."

Sepal raised a quizzical eyebrow. "I do not expect thanks, Doctor. After all, one does not thank..."

"I know. I know. I've heard it before."

"Do you have any questions?"

McCoy shook his head. He did, in fact, have many he should ask, but was afraid to.

Sepal walked to the door, turning back before stepping into the corridor. "May I return at some time when you are not so fatigued? I have questions I must ask you."

"It's your ship. I can't stop you from coming here. But if you have any questions, ask Spock." He suddenly felt lightheaded and faltered. "No... no, don't ask Spock. We're sick. Can't this wait til we get to the Starbase? We humans could sure teach you some manners. It's not logical to badger sick people."

McCoy smugly noticed that he had gotten a reaction from the captain. Sepal's brows had disappeared under his snowy bangs before he left.

Probably shook him up real good. Vulcans! Hope I'm stirring up all kinds of perfect brain waves. Who am I kidding? They've got orders to ignore me. The only thing stirred up on this ship is me. He felt a little ashamed at his display. Why am I taking it out on them? Spock wouldn't let me get away with it. I'm being ruder than that brat, Elaan. She didn't know how to accept hospitality. Looks like I've lost my knack for being a gentlemanly guest along with everything else. Spock, I need you...

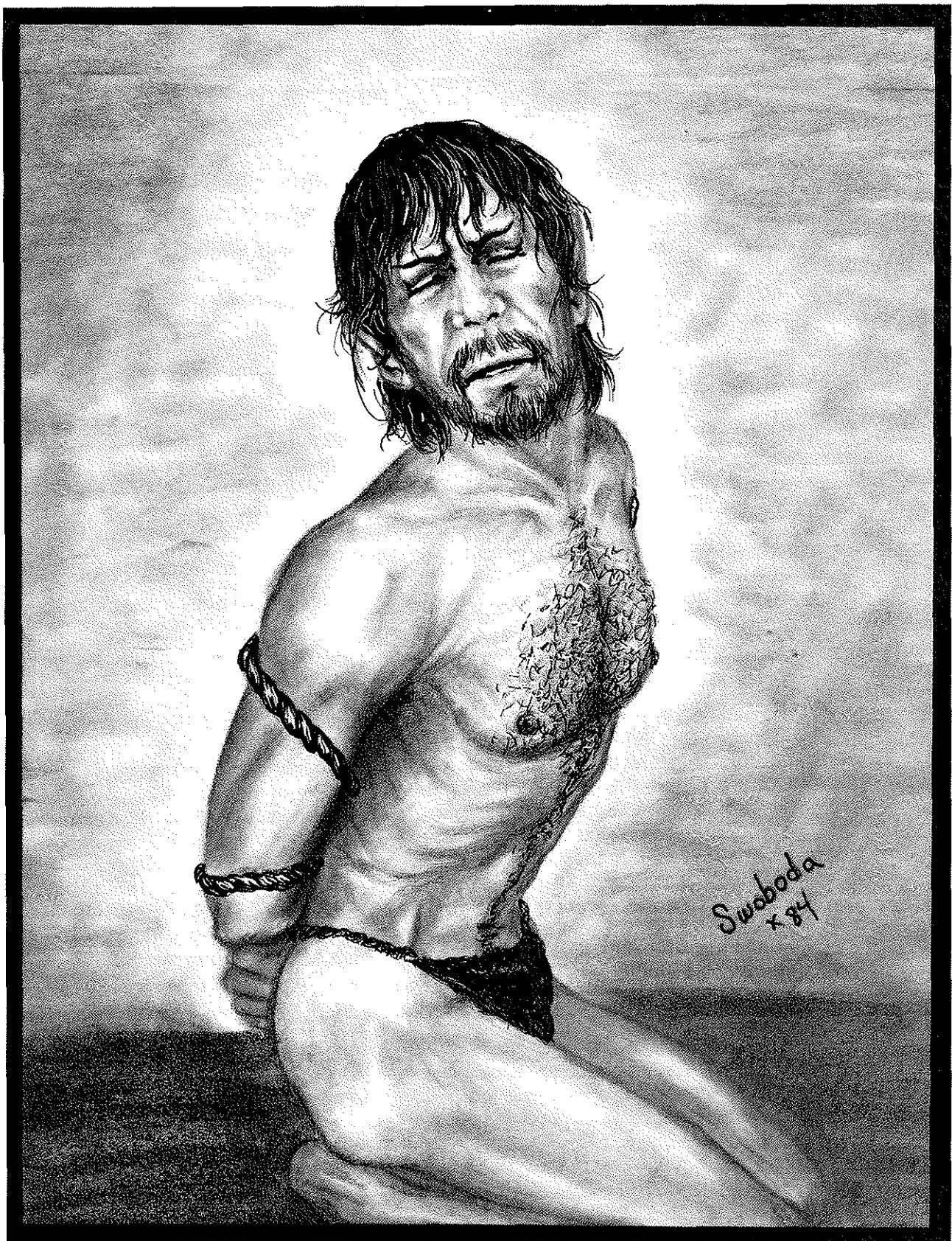
He escaped from his thoughts again in sleep, praying it would be dreamless. It wasn't.



As usual, his sleep was light and uneasy. When he heard the clatter of the approaching Klingons, he wasn't even sure if he had already been awake. They burst into the room and jerked him upright. The inquisitor demanded to know the standard emergency deployment of Federation starships and dreadnoughts for an aggressive Klingon violation of the Klingon/Federation neutral zone. He was tiredly mumbling that he barely knew what a parsec was let alone the coordinates for a fleet of ships when one of the guards unsheathed a glowing cord. A part of him wondered at the device he could not remember having seen before. Another part of him felt a rush of heat an instant before the first searing blow landed. He was running, crawling, rolling, screaming, shielding and writhing round and round the cell as the arching sickle of fire pursued him. His body blazed before they halted.

In a corner he flailed, hysterically trying to crawl out of the tortured skin. Above his own hoarse moans, he heard a quiet sobbing. How could it be? He was moaning loud enough to render a red alert silent, yet he distinctly heard the soft crying.

It was Spock, restrained in the opposite corner. Spock's crying cause he can't help me. That's not good for him. Didn't I figure out once that tearing emotion from him like that could ruin him? Hell, I'm already ruined. Too late for Jim to rescue me now. My being here is making it



harder for Spock to hang in there. If I weren't around he just might be strong enough to make it.

The old carotid artery can rescue me, and Spock. I'll just dig a little hole in the right place and Spock can't stop me and neither can the Klingons. By the time they find out it'll be too late.

Trying to match action to words, he reached for his throat, but something was hindering him. Can't get these busted up arms to move he complained, struggling more frantically. Come on, Leonard, you can reach it he coached, pulling up... up...

Inexplicably, the lights in the cell brightened and he was surrounded by guards preventing him from saving Spock. Still struggling, he realized these were not guards but Vulcan medics. They were attaching his arms and legs closely to the bed. "Quit that," he protested. "I was dreaming... you know, having a nightmare? You don't have to..."

"Doctor McCoy," the healer admonished sternly. "I would have thought you would know better than to engage in violent movement while attached to the supportive apparatus." He turned his attention to an aide. "Sunan, research the terms 'nightmare' and 'dream' as they apply to the mannerisms of humans and particularly this patient." He began repairing the damage McCoy had inflicted upon himself while attempting to rest.

"Listen, youngster, you can save your assistant the trouble of doing your dirty work for you. I can explain what..." A hypo hissed at his shoulder and his eyes blazed with frustration as the tranquilizer rapidly drained his ability to initiate conversation. "I need to tell you about these..." he slurred with difficulty before dropping off into oblivion again.



The days passed, McCoy gaining strength quickly under the artful auspices of Somm, who demonstrated technical skill beyond his years. He spent several hours per day directing the physical therapy, supplying uninteresting viewing tapes, but not the kind of supportive doctor/patient relationship typical of the Enterprise's sickbay. The Vulcan brand of support consisted of a calming, quiet atmosphere.

Able to be out of bed periodically, McCoy would sit in his stateroom. He appreciated the feel of the almost luxurious floor length Vulcan robe he had been issued. The soft, deep blue fabric almost caressed his still sensitive skin, and he preferred to wear it all day instead of getting dressed in sickbay coveralls and venturing out of his cabin.

Captain Sepal was a regular visitor, attempting to conduct the required preliminary debriefing in short sessions. These were most often fruitless as Dr. McCoy was usually unwilling or unable to cooperate. At one such meeting, the captain inquired as to why McCoy's punishment had continued after his captors learned he was not a source of information concerning Starfleet.

"Beats the hell out of me," McCoy replied. "Hey, get it? That's a little joke. See, that's just what they did, beat the hell out of me."

At Sepal's lack of response, McCoy abandoned the bitter humor and considered the question. "I really don't know. They kept interrogating me until you came and busted up their routine. That was long after they hit me with the mind sifter. You'd think they would have gathered from the information they stole from my mind that I couldn't help them. Maybe they didn't want Spock to get jealous or think I was the favorite. Or maybe they just needed the exercise. Most of the time they'd question Spock and me together. They would ask me questions I couldn't answer and mop up the floor with me, and then they'd start on him."

Sepal finally interrupted. "Did Commander Spock know the answers to their questions?"

"You have to ask? Don't you Vulcans know everything?"

"Did Commander Spock provide the required responses?"

A chunk of titanium materialized inside McCoy and sank heavily in his stomach. "I told you I didn't know. How would you expect me to recognize the required responses?" he hedged nervously. "When it was his turn, I'd just crawl off to the farthest corner to lick my wounds. Do you think I cared what was happening to him? I was good and relieved my turn was over. How do you like my selfless loyalty?"

"Your loyalty is not in question at this time. Did you hear Spock stating pertinent Starfleet data to the inquisitors?"

"I only heard me singing the blues. Don't you ever sing the blues when you've had a real rotten day?"

Sepal rose. "Lt. Commander, one does not answer a question with a question at a debriefing. I will provide you with tapes so that you may review the correct debriefing procedures before our next meeting. See that you study and implement them."

Shortly after Sepal left, McCoy's prescription lunch was delivered. "I am requested to remind you," the yeoman who had brought the food recited, "that if you wish to take your meals unsupervised, you must consume a minimum of 50% of each food item. Of course, it is preferred that you ingest the entire meal. It is also advised that you dress yourself." She placed a bundle of clothing on the foot of the bed.

The efficient yeoman was already on her way out. McCoy hurried to get in one ungrateful jab before the doors closed. "Tell your head chef this stuff would taste better with a few gourmet Klingon maggots thrown in." His stomach knotted. That wasn't funny, just nasty. But he was too dejected to react in any other way.

He glumly set about eating the required 50%, not because he was in any way inclined to cooperate, but because he wanted to avoid the dull, reasonable reprisals he would face if he didn't. Eating alone was no picnic, but neither was eating with Vulcans, who generally held that conversation detracted from the appreciation and accomplishment of eating.

Had McCoy's perceptions been more in character, he would have been flattered by the obvious care that had gone into the preparation of his lunch. The fresh salad vegetables had been grown on the ship by a crew who made use of the fact that water was more plentiful in space than on their home world. Gardening was a luxury to these spacers. The main course was a large vegetable smothered in a rich, creamy sauce. It

was a favorite dish among Vulcans. The dessert was a sweeter and gooier pudding than Vulcans generally chose, but had been altered to satisfy Vulcan's perception of human taste.

He labored over the underrated meal, elaborately leaving exactly half of each portion untouched. He then carefully eased into the loose slacks, shirt and slippers. But he preferred putting on the drab outfit himself rather than be forced to dress later by a condescending med tech. By now, his back, left hip and leg ached considerably. He limped dispiritedly back to bed to stretch out on top of the spread. He didn't notice the subtle beauty of its pattern. Various shades of tan swirled together like the sand of Vulcan stirred by the busy fingers of the wind.

He traced the patterns without seeing them, and that's how Somm found him over an hour later. The healer's voice directly above his head startled him. "I am here to discuss your therapy."

"Blast! Did you have to sneak up on me like that?"

"If you were meditating, please excuse the interruption," Somm apologized almost hopefully.

"Fat chance. My mind's as empty as a black hole."

"I have noticed that proximity to Vulcans agitates you. Therefore, I have surmised that your therapy sessions would be less stressful if you could conduct them without our direct supervision.

He held up a small grey box attached to an elastic belt. "This is the TMS 1200. It is to be worn during your exercise periods. If you will rise, I will demonstrate."

"No, I don't think I feel like getting up just now," McCoy drawled. "I can see how to put it on. Just tell me how the thing works. I may be addled, but I still understand English."

"The device should rest there," Somm indicated the side of McCoy's left thigh with a distant, precisely pointed finger. "The TMS 1200 has been calibrated to my estimation of your current strength. Naturally, it is a biofeedback device designed to make you cognizant of the appropriateness of your efforts. If your exertions are beneath your ability, you will be told verbally to 'increase output'. When your progress is in keeping with my expectations, you will hear a humming sound, not unpleasant to the ears. If you over exert or require rest, you will be reminded to 'lower output' or 'discontinue'."

"Okay, leave your gadget here. We'll get along fine. Sounds like we're gonna have some real interesting conversations."

Somm placed the monitor on McCoy's desk. "You require three to four exercise periods a day, no less than two hours apart. They should last until the TMS 1200 indicates you should stop. It will still be necessary for me to check your daily progress personally."

As far as McCoy was concerned, he had already given his opinion of Somm's therapy aid, so he said nothing more as the healer left. McCoy didn't like being expected to conduct his therapy on his own. Somm would appear as soon as he failed to

meet minimum requirements, but it would have been easier if he had a definite time schedule and living supervisors to report to.

Finally, he rose and limped almost aimlessly toward the door, disregarding the TMS 1200 altogether. Therapy sure is a fancy word for pacing he thought as he started up the corridor. After a few turns up and down, he was concentrating deeply on lifting his left leg and propelling it forward. No one offered him a cool cloth to wipe away the sweat that had begun to drip down his face. No one noticed that the patient, who professed so strenuously to be uncooperative, was making a genuine effort to regain the use of his damaged leg.

By the time McCoy realized he should stop, he was very tired and very sore. He concentrated on the door to his cabin, which looked far away, and moved more and more slowly toward it. He was distracted from his goal by the sight of Sepal. McCoy envied the captain's effortless strides.

"I trust you are in the final phase of a therapy session," the captain hinted, studying the exhausted doctor who had stopped to lean against the wall.

"Sometimes I follow orders," McCoy admitted. "At least partially."

As usual, the Vulcan did not question the implications of McCoy's sarcasm. "You received a message tape from Captain Kirk." He started to hand over the cassette, but changed his mind. "May I assist you to your quarters?"

"I can make it." McCoy reached for the small orange tape pack.

"As you wish." Sepal handed him the tape and continued on his way.

When McCoy finally reached his room, he was too tired to be concerned with a tape. He dropped on the bed to rest, aching too much to think about anything else. Shortly, a nurse arrived with a pain medication. He took it gratefully without noticing that his Vulcan caretakers were beginning to second guess him, predicting that he might need it at this time.

When he was feeling better, he remembered the tape on the spread beside him. He picked it up and slowly made his way to the desk. Carefully sitting down, he inserted it in the viewer and settled back to receive his message.

"Hi Bones. I'm glad we've finally got you back. You know I wanted it to be me to pull you and Spock out of there, but you're rescued and that's what counts. Enterprise hasn't been herself without you two, and I guess I haven't either. What matters is that you're safe now and you'll be back where you belong as fast as I can bribe my way back to Starbase 11. I've heard you were pretty banged up so I don't want to wear you out. Besides, the personal talk will have to wait until we're back together. You just bounce back to be ready when I get there to pick you up. Kirk out."

McCoy jerked the tape from the viewer and hurled it into a corner. You naive bastard! he raged. You like everything simple, all the loose ends neatly tied up. surprise. All I am is loose ends. They'll never get me sorted out. The rescue came too late, Jim Boy, too late. You aren't getting me back. And Spock. Oh God, maybe I'll be locked up and won't have to see your face when you find out about Spock...

He lurched back to the bed. Pressing his throbbing head into the pillow, he tried to cope with the impact of his despair.



Healer Somm thought it strange that McCoy did not mention his experience in captivity, but assumed that if the human needed conversation, he would speak to Captain Sepal. At the daily crew briefings, it was, in fact, Sepal who suggested that McCoy's behavior was atypical for a human. In addition, this officer was displaying substandard military conduct. The healer's knowledge of human psychology was limited. He did not know if McCoy's belligerence was normal or if it was a sign of deeper trauma. If the patient was having adverse emotional reactions to his imprisonment, Somm could not help him. The Cocat was still a week away from Starbase 11, and McCoy's problems would have to wait until they arrived. It was unfortunate there hadn't been time to pick up a human physician when the Cocat, being the closest ship, received orders to effect the rescue inside Klingon territory.

Vulcan methods of controlling emotion were of no use to a human unless the patient would permit a mind meld to guide him through the disciplines. This human was obviously resistant to, or perhaps incapable of, discipline and mental joining. Yet, at one therapy session, Somm had offered his services as healer to meld with McCoy and help salve the mental scars. His proposal was rebuffed with such violence that he did not suggest it again.

"Don't you dare come near me, you computerized excuse for a doctor! I never did go along with this melding business. Besides, haven't you figured it out, Doctor Boy Wonder? They ransacked and looted my mind. They didn't leave anything to meld with."

Six days away from the starbase, Sepal had thought he had make a breakthrough. McCoy had asked the first reasonable questions since being on board. For once, McCoy initiated the conversation as he and the captain were seated in McCoy's stateroom.

"How did you find us?" he asked in a bland, unconcerned voice.

"When your shuttle was thrown off course in the ion storm, Commander Spock sent a distress signal before your accidental crossing of the neutral zone. Following the projected path of the storm, sensors plotted your course and confirmed your presence in enemy territory. Through the spy network on the planet Rizor, your precise whereabouts were discerned. From that point, it was primarily a matter of getting a vessel in and getting you out."

"Six months! It took Starfleet six months?!" McCoy stormed in familiar animosity.

"Starfleet had nothing to do with the proceedings, Doctor. The Federation Council pretended to negotiate for your release, but at no time was the idea of paying ransom for your return considered. Blackmailers and kidnappers will not be bargained with; therefore, the Cocat alone was assigned to attempt your rescue. This is a small vessel, and quite fast. We were able to get in and out without capture ourselves."

"Why did you take the chance, then?" Even Starfleet officers were expendable when measured against the risk of causing a war or losing a ship. The Klingons had

accused him and Spock of being spies, and he was sure Fleet had denied the accusation, but to no avail.

"Starfleet had to know if Commander Spock had been 'broken'. He is too knowledgeable, privy to too much classified information, to be allowed to remain in the hands of the Klingons. Fleet assumed that extracting information from a Vulcan was impossible. That fact was supported when the Klingons changed tactics. They ceased to assure the Council of his good health and started to use more barbaric methods of persuasion. However, what information the Klingons might have gotten from Spock, only he knows." He looked meaningfully at McCoy. McCoy looked away. "Our mission was twofold. If Spock were dead, to find out if he had been broken, or return whoever was alive for debriefing."

McCoy was sweating. He must turn Sepal's attention away from Spock's loyalties before his own actions became incriminating. "All this military mumbo-jumbo doesn't explain why they kept me around. I was no use to them from the very beginning."

Sepal leaned back in the spring-back chair, steepling his fingers at his waist. "Could you not guess, Doctor? The Klingons were using you to assure Spock's cooperation."

McCoy stared at him in horror. Oh Spock, you damned fool. You were so transparent to the Klingons, and now your countrymen know you have a weakness, a price.

"How is he?" McCoy mumbled, mentally bracing himself to hear the worst. Since seeing Spock in sickbay on that first day aboard ship, he hadn't asked about him. If Spock had died, McCoy was sure that the Vulcans would have informed him. He had hoped they would, at any rate. The debriefings left him with no clues as to his friend's health.

"Commander Spock is almost fully recovered and has already filed a report with Starfleet."

Relief washed over McCoy and he dropped some caution. "Can I see him?"

"During his debriefing, he was not permitted contact with a possible collaborator. Shall I summon him for you now?" Sepal reached for the intercom switch and was not prepared for McCoy's reaction.

The doctor pulled himself up from his chair to rage indignantly. "You mean to tell me that Spock is up and around and hasn't come to see me yet?"

Before Sepal could reply, McCoy was out the door.

The headache was back in full force. His legs ached, his eyes blurred. He hurriedly limped down the corridor in search of the off duty section. This was the first time he had gone anywhere except for sickbay and he wasn't quite sure of his destination. Ahead, a crewman emerged and McCoy bawled after him, "Hey you!" Not responding, the man continued on, putting more distance between them.

Frantic, his pursuer spied stripes on the swinging arm and tried, "Hey, lieutenant!" The lieutenant stopped and McCoy awkwardly caught up.

"Commander Spock. Where is he?"

"I last saw him in the Officer's Lounge, Sir," came the unruffled reply.

McCoy got directions, then lurched down the corridor, the headache blinding him. You ought to know that I'd want to see you, but I didn't want to bring any more trouble on you than you brought on yourself. You're up and around and can't spare the effort to see how I am... or tell me how to get through the Vulcan inquisition. Trying not to incriminate you in these daily debriefings without incriminating myself is as hard as the interrogations on Rizor. Are you just counting on evidence from a crazy man as being inadmissible? Can't you even grant me an honorable discharge before they ship me off to a rehab colony?

He reached the door of the lounge. Inside, a group sat listening to a lecture delivered by a Vulcan wearing science blue. No one noticed his entrance until he walked up to them. The lecturer paused at the sight of the furious human. All faces turned to the intruder. All wore the serene, aloof mask that was so typically Vulcan.

"Spock," McCoy stammered.

Spock rose and stood at formal attention, hands folded neatly behind his back, his features carved in stone. The Vulcans turned discreetly away.

"Doctor." The voice was toneless, Spock at his most defensive, therefore most Vulcan.

"Go to hell." McCoy turned on his heel and limped out, his shoulders sagging. Spock stared after him a moment, then resumed his seat.

Now it was time to stomp off mumbling self-righteously, but instead, he propped himself up against a bulkhead. Walking, let alone stomping, exacted too high a cost in pain to be undertaken lightly. Besides, he didn't know where he was going, and trying to figure that out was difficult because he couldn't hear himself think about the clamor of his anger. Headache and bad temper jockeyed for priority. He could put a lid on the headache with some reliable drug. Then, back in his quarters, he could attempt the harder task of sanding the rough edges off his bad temper with lavish applications of self pity.

With a hurt look over his shoulder at the closed lounge door, he pulled himself away from the wall and started for sickbay. The way was tedious. As he progressed, he leaned more and more heavily against the wall, traveling hand over hand. Just like the roaches back in Georgia... hugging the wall, he thought in an unsuccessful attempt to be cute. That mental picture called up more unpleasant ones of the creatures in his prison cell. How he hated them. They had lived there by choice. Sometimes he had wondered if they'd been on the Klingon payroll, so effectively had they added to his misery. His fist impacted against the wall and he purposefully focused on the stretch of corridor ahead, wondering why he kept putting himself through this. The morbid imagery had accomplished something. Sickbay was only a few feet ahead and he hadn't noticed the last, most difficult stretch.

Once inside, he eased carefully into a chair on his right hip. His head drooped forward. One hand grasped his injured hip and the other massaged the rigid muscles at the base of his skull.

It wasn't until he heard the whirr of the Feinberger that he knew Somm was there. Shivering, he dropped his hand and looked up.

"You appear to be experiencing a relapse," the young doctor commented. He spoke in Vulcan to someone out of McCoy's range of vision and resumed studying the scanner's display.

McCoy felt a light touch under each elbow and saw that he was flanked by two nurses. "What's the big production?" he complained, shrugging them off.

"We will assist you to a diagnostic bed where you will undergo a complete examination to determine the cause of your difficulty," Somm explained.

"Oh no you won't," McCoy asserted. "I'm staying right here." He glared at each of the nurses. "You two can get lost."

They took a single step backward but clearly had no intention of getting lost.

He looked back at his doctor. "If you want to know what's wrong with me, why don't you ask? Or don't Vulcans believe in the direct approach? Now you just listen while I save us both a lot of time and trouble. I have a headache, a bad one. Give me a few pain killers of your choice or a bottle of brandy, which no good sickbay should be without and I'll go out of here cured and happy." He shivered again and wrestled out of his tunic, favoring the shoulder with the broken collarbone out of habit. "Moving around is too hard and this ship is too hot for me to be wearing this sauna suit. Does the Vulcan wardrobe include anything a little lighter?"

McCoy stopped, becoming aware that the scanner was still humming. His eyes dropped from Somm's face to the tool. It was definitely pointing to his hip. He jerked it out of Somm's hand and thrust it at one of the nurses. "I... said... I... had... a... headache! My God, don't you even know my head from my backside!?"

"I do." Somm's words were measured and calm. "I will supply drug therapy for the headache. You need a tranquilizer as well. Furthermore, it is necessary that I determine the cause of the considerable pain you are experiencing in your legs and hip." He gave orders in Vulcan and a nurse left McCoy's side.

"Oh, that." McCoy self-consciously let go of his thigh. "It hurts because I accidentally walked too far today. If I had remembered to wear the little box you gave me to keep me honest, I wouldn't have aggravated it. If your headache pills ease my leg a little, I won't complain, but no tranquilizer. I'm calm now." He took the scanner from the remaining nurse and handed it back to Somm. "See for yourself," he advised, pointing to the device. He draped his arm over the back of the chair in an elaborate display of relaxation.

"Bargaining with one's symptoms is illogical, but if it will help me to manage you more efficiently, I will attempt it." Somm reached for a nearby chair and sat down opposite McCoy. "I will provide a pain suppressant and withhold the tranquilizer if by doing so I can induce you to tranquilize yourself naturally. I will postpone the examination until tomorrow morning. At that time, if you have ceased to overtax your body and the inflammation has subsided, the examination may, as you suggest, be unnecessary." Somm selected some of the pills from the returning nurse and handed them to his patient.

McCoy noticed with satisfaction that the healer left the hypo on the medication tray untouched. He carefully rose to go, reasoning that this was the best he could hope to get from a Vulcan sickbay. Better to get out before he lost control of his temper

again. He didn't want to find himself admitted and sedated for the night. He levered himself up.

"I'll just be going, then," he said, forcing a smile, but not holding it. These people weren't impressed with smiles.

Somm held up a restraining hand. "I am going to procure the garments you requested. You will be more comfortable if you resume your seat until I return." He left, along with the nurses.

Reluctantly, McCoy sat back down. Hastily, he read the directions on the medication packet, took out two tiny, egg-shaped pills and swallowed them without water. Then he counted them, calculating how long the ration would last if his headache disappeared, if he couldn't sleep tonight, if two didn't work, if...

"Dr. McCoy."

McCoy startled. "Don't call me that! Call me... Call me McCoy. Just McCoy!" he spat. His aggression deflated like an Argellian puff blossom in a compression chamber. "Forget it. It's this headache. Can I go?"

Somm stood behind an elaborate antigrav chair with clothes piled on the seat. He lifted them, then handed McCoy a loosely woven tunic from the top of the stack.

It slipped on with relative ease thanks to its roomy cut and dangling sleeves. The burgundy-grey striations in the fabric resembled the Vulcan sky at sunset and the name on the ID label imbedded in the collar was Captain Sepal's. The rest of the clothes were also lightweight, ranging widely in color and design. Each was imprinted with the name of a different contributing crew member. McCoy noticed none of this.

"I don't need that contraption," he tried half-heartedly. He gave the chair a look that could melt permatron.

"You do need it and I suggest you use it until I see you tomorrow."

Aware of Somm's uncompromising gaze, McCoy climbed in, accepting the clothes and waited passively while the healer adjusted controls in a side panel to accommodate the passenger's physique and specialized support needs.

McCoy left in the chair and rode it most of the way back to his quarters. At the final turn before his own corridor, he abandoned it and covered the remaining distance on his own two legs.

In his quarters he lay down to await the pain killer's relief. Why does everyone and everything irritate me? I have gotten my way, well, most of it, and I don't even feel like gloating. Why am I mad all the time? His mind was either angry in the present or suffering in the past. Why can't I stop thinking altogether,

If I had a bottle, that would be easy. I wouldn't be so aware of the exact moment I finally go over the edge. I can feel it coming. Where's my friend, brandy, when I really need him. Friend. What a laugh. On the Enterprise, Spock was... well Spock. Certainly Vulcan, but understanding, receptive, concerned. After what we've been through, you'd think... but here, he's super-Vulcan. Unthinkable to have a human friend. Damn it, he's ashamed of me! The crazy doctor. I remind him of too much. And I bring

too much out in him. Poor dumb jerk, I almost feel sorry for him. Except I feel too sorry for myself.

The door buzzer sounded, breaking into his thoughts. He knew by ship time it was the middle of the night. Who would be bothering him at this hour? There was no one he wanted to see. But if it was Somm, he could override the lock and McCoy did not want to lose more face in front of him. The healer had seen the state he was in. Probably been at it all these hours trying to figure out what's gotten into me now, he thought in self-deprecating humor as he rose and pressed the button on the wall. Spock stood in the corridor.

"What do you want?" McCoy snapped. He reached to close and lock the door, but not before his visitor quickly stepped in. Wordlessly, they faced each other. With clinical detachment, McCoy noted the dark green bruises still staining the Vulcan's face and neck, and the circles under his eyes. He was skeletally thin, and there was a slight tremor in his hands.

"You look like hell. I want you to leave. Get out before I lose my temper and make a scene."

Spock flipped the switch to close the door.

"What do you think you're doing?" McCoy flared.

"I have to talk to you."

"Why now? We've been on board almost two weeks and you haven't bothered to stop in and say so much as how-do. So beat it!"

"Captain Sepal and Healer Somm have reported your irrational behavior to me. They feel I may have some insight into the problems you are experiencing." Spock's voice was bland, cool, as if he were discussing some scientific anomaly.

"You. How could you have some insight? Just because you were my cell mate for six months? Just because they made mincemeat out of you at the same time? Well, the Klingons have made hash out of your brains, too. How could you possibly know what's bothering me? Besides, you've got a few problems of your own, haven't you? Don't tell me that you've spent the past two weeks in debriefing talking about me."

The scathing sarcasm seemed to have no effect on the Vulcan. His armor was firmly in place, not allowing McCoy's venomous remarks to penetrate. "Doctor, calm yourself. Your excitability is detrimental to your present level of health."

"Excitable! Hell, Spock, it's what I do best! I'm a demented human, remember? You want to see excited, stick around while I really get worked up!" McCoy was standing next to a shelf unit and picked up a tape case. He swung it at the Vulcan's head, but his arm was clamped in a vise-like grip in mid swing. The two men stared at each other, one with murderous rage, the other with icy detachment. McCoy dropped the case and Spock released him. The doctor walked slowly to a chair and collapsed into it with a groan.

"Are you ready to talk calmly now?"

McCoy sagged further, dropping his head into his hands. "What do you want?"

"Healer Somm has a treatment for your mental distress."

McCoy sighed. "Can't you all leave me alone? You're as persistent as the Klingons. What is this treatment?"

"A mind meld to render the painful memories of your incarceration more endurable."

McCoy's head snapped up. "Mind meld?" he snarled. "You son of a..."

"Doctor, I do not suggest it without knowledge of your reluctance. The mind sifter was an uncomfortable experience for you, and naturally you resist..."

"Resist? What's the joke? You know me. At least, I thought you did. We shared a cell together, remember? You know how I feel about anything tampering with my mind." His voice lowered to a whisper, the words coming painfully. "Oh, I'm sorry. You don't know me. But I'm thrilled Somm's meld worked for you. They've got you all nice and logical now. You probably view the whole thing as logical. After all, look at it from the Klingons' point of view, right?"

Spock's gaze dropped as he studied the toes of his boots. "I did not accept the meld from Healer Somm."

"Good for you. Melded with the ship's computer, huh? A match made in heaven," McCoy sneered.

Spock's eyes remained downcast. The hands folded behind his back tightened their grip to control their trembling. "Perhaps I have not made myself clear. I, too, have been unable to bring myself to meld with the healer. I have not been able to control, or share, those memories."

"Aha! You're faking it for all your logical pals out there, aren't you?" McCoy laughed bitterly. "They think you're fine and dandy, but you're just as messed up as I am. At least I have the decency to go insane with honesty. You're gonna do it all nice and sneaky. One day you'll flip out and that'll be it. Probably get someone killed in the process, too," he added cruelly.

Spock flinched and nodded slowly. "Perhaps you are correct. I thought... I had hoped you would permit me to aid you before I..." He cleared his throat. "Let me take your pain."

"No, Spock. You can't help me."

"You are in a state of mental depression," the Vulcan continued. "Depression in humans can be severely debilitating. Healer Somm suggests, and I concur, that unless the mental wounds are healed soon, there are likely to be permanent repercussions. Through the meld, I can dampen some of the more intense recollections. The experience, then, would take on a more tolerable aspect. In your current state, you are not fit for duty, nor does it appear you will be in the future."

"Forget it. No mind tampering. When we get to Starbase 11, I'll get treatment. I see what's happening. I know I need help. But not from you, and not in that way." McCoy studied the rigidly controlled figure before him. It was more than aversion to the meld itself that was bothering him. He suspected the therapy of the meld could be

beneficial. He simply did not want to remember. But at the starbase, there would be no escape. The psychologists would force him to remember, with their drugs and other methods if need be. After they had compelled him to relive the agony in public, they would conclude what he already knew; you can't salvage a psyche that's been shredded by the mind sifter. The pounding in his head began with renewed vigor. He moaned in pain and Spock reached out to him.

"Don't touch me!" He dug his knuckles into his temples. "Oh Sweet Jesus, I'm a real basket case. Every time I think about it, the headache comes." He managed a tight smile. "You been getting headaches, too?"

"Doctor, let me..."

"I said NO! What do you want, more pain? More suffering? More memories? What's it gonna take for you to realize I don't want you inside my head?" Renewed grief at the loss of his wits and of his hope was immediately followed by another wave of rage. It added intensity to the pressure within and he exploded.

"You want to relive it all over again with me? Okay, let's remember together; the gory deaths of the other prisoners, the women screaming, the empty-eyed victims of the sifter and the people reduced to less than people after they were used for experiments. Remember the garbage pile in the exercise yard, the corpses and body parts, and how we were put to work burning them? The smell..." McCoy had lost his last hold on sanity. He was shouting in frenzy. Spock took a step toward him, but McCoy slid out of his chair. He rushed behind the desk, grunting and grabbing the edge for support, putting a barrier between them.

"Let's get to the really good parts, Spock," he grated. "Remember the night the guards got drunk? That whip of theirs? It lit up the cell."

The blood drained from Spock's face so the mottled bruises appeared more livid.

"They threw me down without bothering to tie me. I was no match for them. It hurt. Oh God, how it hurt. And they made you watch. Then it was your turn. Want to relive that, too? They tied your arms behind your back at the elbows. They were still afraid of you, then. That's how you got your broken nose, remember? And they poured it on, Spock. I'll never think of firelight as romantic again. Remember how I screamed? Why didn't you scream, Spock? It only made them angrier when you wouldn't. You never made a sound... til after they left. They didn't untie you, and you couldn't get to me."

Throughout McCoy's ranting, Spock had stood rigid, his eyes glazing over, his clenched hands resting on the desk, knuckles whitening from the pressure.

"Is that what you want to crawl into my mind for? You want filth? I'll give it to you."

"Enough," Spock hissed through clenched teeth.

"I haven't even begun! How about the mind sifter? Neat little gadget they have there, huh? Knives its way into your brain and carves out all the horrors, all the little demons lurking there... makes you want to scream out anything they ask for just so they'll stop. But you didn't even wait for the mind sifter to start talking. If you spilled your guts from the first, then when they used the sifter, you must have babbled like a

regular Fleet Manual! How did you like having your own, personal, individualized torture, knowing that the longer you lived, the more you were destroying what you claimed to believe in? We won't know how much you told until the Klingons come barreling out of the Neutral Zone in Federation style..."

"I said enough."

"I get dreams, Spock." McCoy leaned heavily on the desk, taking the weight off his throbbing hip. "Do you get dreams? Remember how I cried like a baby when they brought me back from the sifter? How you had to hold me for hours before I came back to reality? You couldn't meld with me then, could you? You were too sick, so you tried to settle me down with promises of a rescue. Some comfort. How could I look forward to being rescued just so I could testify at your trial? God knows you were driven to it, but how could I deny you were a traitor? Vulcans are mighty particular about loyalty. So tell me, what do they do with traitors?"

"Kroykah!" Spock bellowed as he slammed his fists down on the desk. The metal gave with a shrieking protest as it bent. Not until the desk collapsed did he leave off the assault. He was shaking his head in fervent denial of what McCoy had made him hear. All the control he had worked so hard to maintain in this past week was gone.

McCoy stared in shock at the wild-eyed figure before him. Now Spock looked capable of murder, and in his fright, McCoy knew he desperately wanted to live. They had been through so much together, and now he was likely to end up dead at the hands of his friend. He wondered fleetingly where all his training had gone. He was a doctor, dedicated to healing. He had recognized the mania in himself, and failed to see the extent of the disturbance in Spock, who could only use Vulcan disciplines to hide his wounds, but not to cure them. "Are you all right?" he managed to whisper, afraid of turning that destructive anger on himself.

The fire was slowly dying in Spock's eyes as he stood staring at his battered hands. Reality returned with the pain. He breathed in ragged gasps. McCoy came around the twisted desk and tentatively touched Spock on the shoulder.

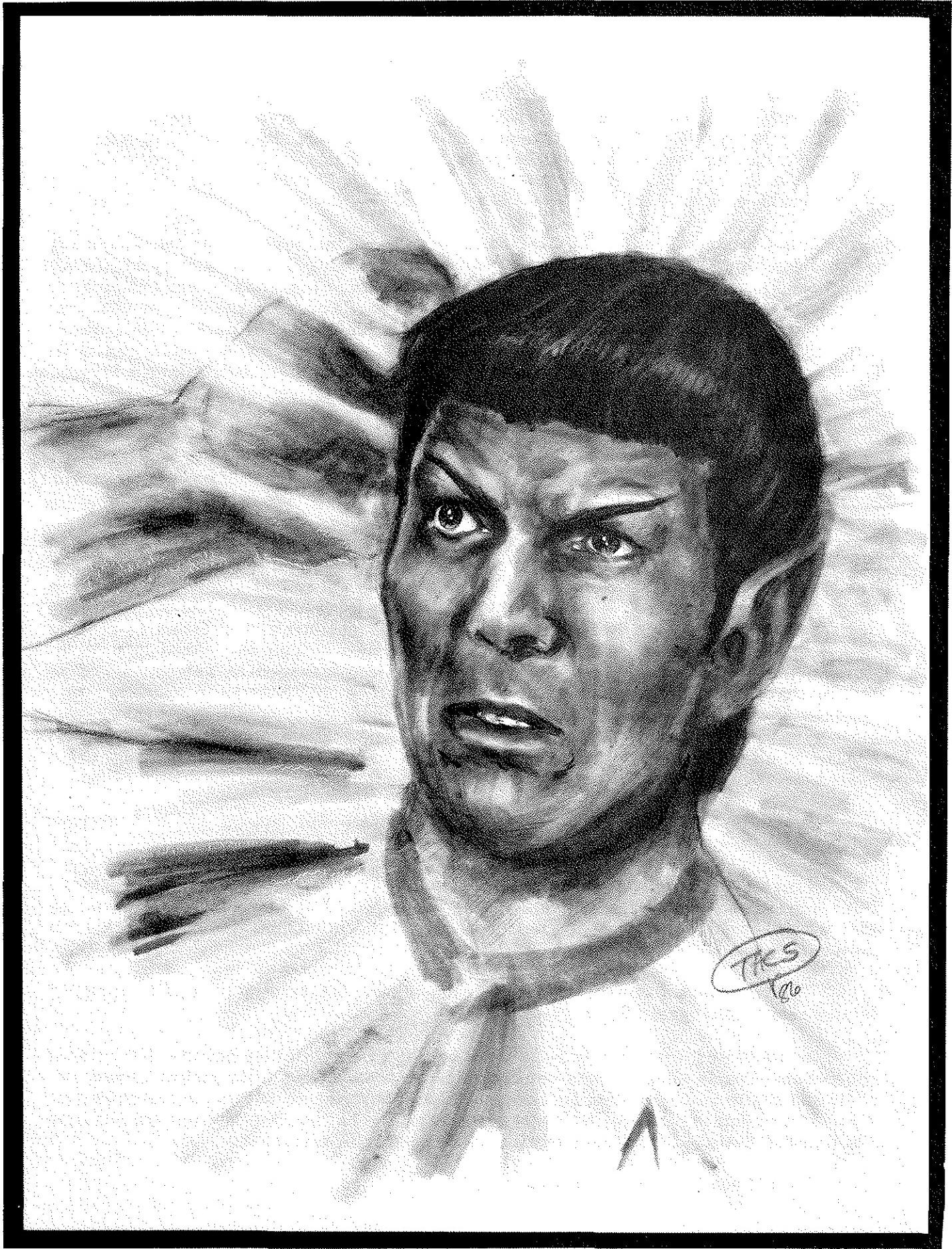
"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that to you. Will you let me look at your hands?"

Spock yanked away as he tried to reassemble his features into the neutral mask. But his eyes remained haunted, his mouth set in a frown. "My hands are not broken," he said with as much control as he could muster. "I did not come here to provoke this mutual outburst."

"We've always had that effect on each other. At least that hasn't changed." McCoy said softly, reassuringly.

Spock raised a puzzled brow, a weak parody of the familiar gesture, but relaxed somewhat. The familiarity was comfortable, and comforting. He looked around the room and spotted a brown custiform couch, which he sank into with an uncharacteristic sigh. McCoy joined him bearing a wet towel from the bathroom to sponge and examine the wounds. Satisfied that treatment could wait, he leaned back.

"Would you have struck me just then?"



Spock glanced at the ruined desk. "I don't know. I've had to suppress my anger for so long. When control escaped me, I was unaware of what I was doing."

McCoy shifted uncomfortably. "Why did you hold back all those months? I sure as hell didn't! If the Klingons learned one thing from me, it was a whole new vocabulary of spacers' obscenities."

Spock continued staring at the desk. "I dared not lose control. The stakes were too high. I wanted to extinguish them for what they did."

"Take it easy." McCoy's reassuring touch calmed the Vulcan. "'What stakes were too high? You've never been afraid to die."

Spock slowly shifted his gaze to the hand resting gently on his arm. "The price for my assured docile behavior was not my life, McCoy. It was yours."

The hand was drawn away. Sepal had been right... he had been Spock's price. Many times during their imprisonment, McCoy had envied Spock his total body control. Spock could have just turned himself off, simply willed himself to die rather than endure the torment. Many times he had begged Spock to be put out of his misery painlessly, quickly with tal shaya, but had been rebuked for losing hope. Now he knew. Spock had endured all the tortures, lost integrity and hope himself, because the Klingons had threatened to kill the doctor if he did not cooperate.

Tears of humility and frustration welled in McCoy's eyes. This final grief was too much. He had been an unjustifiable burden. "I guess I should feel flattered. But I'm not worth the security of Earth and the other Federation worlds. How am I supposed to live watching you and countless innocent beings pay the consequences for keeping me alive?" His voice broke. Horror flooded him as he realized the magnitude of his ransom.

Spock had now enough experience with the doctor's moods to sense that another demonstration of uncontrollable anger or sorrow was forthcoming. He forced his sore fingers to grip his friend's chin. He lifted it until the haggard blue eyes met his. Slowly, with conviction, he stated, "I betrayed no one."

"Look, I'm not trying to bait you now," McCoy responded hoarsely, "but I heard you."

Spock's hand dropped, and his eyes wandered to the ruined desk. "You may be assured, I endangered no one. The information you heard me reveal was false. I provided our captors with a considerable amount of erroneous data." He swallowed twice, quickly, unconsciously.

McCoy's expression was changed to one of incredulous curiosity.

Spock continued. "The dilithium deposits I described were real. However, I failed to tell them that the crystals are flawed and will break down under the stresses required of warp drive. As you know, science, research, and the pursuit of truth are not high priorities of the Klingons. They are scavengers. They implement the achievements and discoveries they pilfer without necessarily understanding them thoroughly. It was my opinion that they would not bother to take precautions standard for Federation miners. It is likely they won't surmise the crystals are defective until one, or maybe several of their vessels explode upon engaging warp drive."

McCoy's higher feelings were swept aside as he indulged in a satisfied sense of vengeful glee. "You pointy eared genius!" he marveled.

Spock true to his compulsion to offer complete explanations, went on. "The planet, Parad 4, I recommended for agricultural development, does have a rich growing medium and a climate conducive to large crop yield... most of the time. Since I suspect they will not bother to survey it adequately, their crops should be flourishing when the storms strike which devastate the surface every 27 months Earth time."

"Well, son of a gun!" McCoy was impressed. "Why didn't you tell me? I could have helped you. I'm a pretty good liar myself. And for God sakes, why did you let me worry like that? You should have told me. I wasn't the enemy."

"I am not trying to bait you either, Doctor, but if you knew my strategy, I could not count on your ability to maintain silence under pressure."

McCoy was moved to feign injured pride. "You're probably right. You saw how quick I folded when Parmen had his hands on us. I can admit to you that the only reason I didn't sell the Federation out then was because Jim wouldn't let me and on Rizor because I didn't know anything. You sure sent them to chasing their own tails!"

"Temporarily," Spock amended. "I could not invent fictitious information which could not be verified indefinitely. Do you recall the severity of the inquisitors last assault on us?"

McCoy audibly sucked air between his teeth.

"They had been informed that one of my deceptions was discovered. I believe they decided we were of no value to them and were in the process of terminating us. Had the crew of the Cocat taken action any later, we would have..."

Again, McCoy was swept by the enormity of Spock's efforts on his behalf. He was now so convinced that he was incapable of self-control that he let each new reaction play itself out, unchecked. Tears slipped from his eyes. "You poor fool," he choked. "You didn't have to keep up that struggle for me. When they used the sifter on me, they might as well have killed me right then."

Spock's look was uncomprehending.

"Okay, I'll spell it out in terms you can understand. You're bringing Jim a computer with all its circuits crossed. I'm alive, but I've been finished for months." McCoy's head dropped again in despair.

At the mention of the captain's name, a hard knot formed in Spock's stomach. He was sure that Kirk was expecting his officers to come through this ordeal and eventually resume their positions on the Enterprise. He had let the captain down. He had protected McCoy to the best of his ability, but it was not enough. McCoy was no longer able to serve as CMO. The doctor was mentally unfit for duty.

"Dedication... duty..." Spock voiced his thoughts. "These are both owed to a friend." His mask was destroyed, hurt and doubt plain in the haunted features.

McCoy raised his tear-stained face. "Look at me, blubberin like a baby. You want to meld with me?" He shook his head in disbelief. "How could you handle the filth

in my mind? And you haven't let the Healer meld with you to do you the same favor. I believe you didn't tell any Federation secrets, but something's still eating you. How could you help me?"

"There is no danger to you. I could take your memories into my mind. I would withdraw before..." He choked on the last words. "I could not expose myself to the Healer. The... mind sif... sifter..."

McCoy put his arm around the Vulcan's shoulders, feeling the tremors shake him. "Still worried that if your country men saw your human half it would diminish you in their eyes? So now what do we do?" he sighed. "Go to some rehab colony? Get us some brand new personalities? Or do we deal with it, give it time, and help each other?"

Spock was silent for a moment, reconstructing his barriers, not to keep McCoy out, but to wall up the violent uncertainties threatening his sanity. "Indeed, Doctor, you shall confront it. You have been away from the Enterprise too long. If you are to be certified as fit for service, you must deal with your conflicts immediately."

"It's hopeless," McCoy insisted. "We've only got a few days before we get to the starbase. No therapy works that quickly. Healer Somm is not trained to treat human stress. And you won't let him help you, either." McCoy hadn't seriously thought of returning to the Enterprise until Jim Kirk's name had been mentioned. Now he desperately wanted his old life back. This goal was the first step towards healing his wounded inner self. The second step would be harder. He hesitated, then forced himself to speak. "Let's try the meld."

Spock looked again at the desk. "It is futile. You said so yourself. Your natural resistance to it, reinforced by your experience with the mind sifter, would hamper my efforts to create a viable joining."

"I'm not talking about your efforts. I'm talking about our efforts. I won't agree to be the subject of your personal crusade to save me again. I'm only willing to do this if it's a two-sided deal."

"What would it accomplish now?" Spock shrugged in an all too human gesture of defeat. "All we would do is relive each brutality together. It would not help our already unsteady psyches to share each others' feelings."

"You're wrong!" McCoy exclaimed. His vacillating mood had ascended to a peal of inexplicable optimism. He leaned forward, pushing his point like a hovercraft dealer who needs one last sale to win a trip to Wrigley's Pleasure Planet. "The key words are 'together' and 'share'. We couldn't give each other the support we needed in prison. I couldn't help you because you built a wall of isolation around yourself for my protection. And you couldn't help me because I wouldn't have permitted a meld then, even if you had been able to initiate one. But now, we can walk each other through the memories, guide each other through the pain, and offer the comfort we needed."

Spock cast McCoy a doubtful look. "I feel you put too much faith in my abilities. I don't know if I can control my emotions in a sustained meld. We may both find ourselves in danger."

He won't say it, but I know what the real danger is. We could come out of it insane. "It's a chance, but what's our choice. We either put an end to the nightmare

together, or dream it for the rest of our lives." McCoy paused, surprised at his own change in philosophy. "Time alone does not heal all wounds, Spock. Not when the wounds are this deep... this personal. We both need help, and we're the only ones who can do it."

Spock thought over the doctor's words. Time was the factor here. Soon they would be at the starbase. There, the Federation doctors would rule on their fitness. He and McCoy would need shore leave to further recuperate from their physical wounds. But even if Vulcan disciplines could cover up his own instability, he could never trust himself to assume the responsibilities of First Officer. And McCoy's unstable mental state would not permit his return to duty, either. If McCoy was irrevocably insane, he would offer what peace he could and gently withdraw before he was further damaged by the irrationality of the mind. If the doctor was more shaken than deranged, Spock would offer constructive help. And perhaps, though he barely dared to entertain the hope, McCoy could help him. "It is our only option."

McCoy wanted to scream a denial, repulsed by the thought of a meld, but he firmly clamped down on those aversions and finally buried them altogether. This is Spock. This is my friend. Spock could tolerate my private devils. No doubt he's got a few of his own...

"What do we do first?"

Spock searched McCoy's face and found determination beyond the apprehension. His fingers slowly reached for the pressure points, his voice crooned the prescribed formula. "Your mind to my mind. Your thoughts to my thoughts. Your heart to my heart."

Spock was greeted by an earnest welcome, astonished by the easy acceptance and a hearty laugh. C'mon in, Spock. What did you think I'd do, invite you in just to throw you out?

Follow me. Spock took McCoy by the arm and led the way, passing through McCoy's memories since waking on board the Cocat. Spock saw his retreat from the Vulcan healers and the rejection of his own life. Then they were back in prison.

Spock, I don't know about this. I'm afraid. I know you're here with me, but seeing it again, I feel alone.

Reach for me. I am here.

McCoy eagerly grasped the Vulcan's wrist. They shared the nightmare through one set of eyes. They smelled the fetid odors, heard the bones crack, felt the flesh tear without knowing whose experience they relived. Both offered comfort.

The harm is already done. We are recuperating from those wounds now. The punishment is over.

They saw the food bowls alive with maggots. Gone.

The slop buckets aswarm with flies. Gone.

The guards leering faces, laughing, insulting, degrading. Honest, friendly faces await us.

Then the mind sifter. They hesitated at the door to the dreaded room.

I can't do it Spock. I can't feel it again. I can't hear the questions. Why do I have to sacrifice my mind if I don't know anything!!! McCoy mentally screamed and backed away. He was alone in the dark corridor. Spock, don't go in there!

When there was no reply, he advanced to the door and peered into the chamber of horrors. Spock was standing over a McCoy strapped in the chair. That McCoy was screaming soundlessly, the mouth twisting in a painful grimace, begging for the mind rape to stop. McCoy stood watching the most personal violation he could ever imagine in hypnotic fascination. Shaking himself, he backed away in horror, then Spock began to tear at the straps holding the prisoner, ripping away wires and hunks of metal. Sparks flew from the machine, singeing the wraith-like McCoy, who howled in agony. Spock gave one final, mighty blow to the machine, and the apparatus exploded with a thunderous roar. The body in the chair sagged forward and Spock bent to cradle the still figure. McCoy tried to walk to the Vulcan, but the floor was covered with a thick substance, pulling at his feet like molasses. He couldn't reach the two figures in the macabre death embrace.

Spock, that's not me! I'm here! Spock, snap out of it! The Vulcan's body seemed to waver and lose shape and substance, as if a gentle breeze could blow it away.

Spock, I'm not dead. The mind sifter didn't destroy me! I am alive! I'm Leonard McCoy, gentleman, doctor, scientist, and defender of the blasted human race! I like to laugh, to tease you, to heal sickness, and to be there for you and Jim. What's wrong with that? I'm all right. I really am all right!!!

At these words, Spock's form solidified. McCoy stood, transfixed. It was true! He had survived the sifter! He was whole! The machine might even be on the Cocat, captured for analysis, but it was no longer a threat to him! He realized what Spock had done for him, and now the dreams would only be that... dreams. The floor regained density and he rushed to the Vulcan to thank him and sing the praises of the healing meld.

Suddenly he felt himself wrenched from the room, down the corridors, past the empty cell, and finally to the sickbay of the Cocat. He was laying on his bed, tubes attached, eye patched, monitors humming. "Spock?" he called out. "Where are you? I don't understand. This isn't real."

His answer was a low moan from the next bed. McCoy tore the tubes out of his arms and the patch from his eye. It all seemed so real, but there was no sensation of pain as he jumped up and rushed to Spock's side. He saw the Vulcan as he must have looked when they were first rescued. He was filthy, his hair long and matted, naked, scarred, and obviously in pain. His eyes were squeezed shut, and the moans escaping his lips sounded like all the tortured souls in hell.

"Spock! This is an illusion. You're recovering from this like me, remember?" He grabbed Spock's hand and was immediately drawn into the emaciated body and mind. He was wracked with such pain he couldn't help but cry out, and it took all of McCoy's will to convince himself that this was not his pain. He was seeing from Spock's perspective now, and Spock was suffering.

McCoy watched through Spock's eyes as Healer Somm reached for the healing meld. As the healer's fingers touched Spock's face, his voice pealed into his

unconsciousness. 'Half breed... inferior beast from a race of animals... tell us, mongrel... tell us, cur... tell us...'

The voice droned on and on, and Spock was weakening. It was not Somm, but the Klingon Inquisitor's voice. Spock was in the chair this time, strapped in, pain beating away at his barriers. Questions. Questions. Spock was meticulously telling and retelling and retelling lies. But his mind was a maelstrom of confusion. It fought to force pain, hunger and illness to the background. It frantically sought to unravel fabrications which were entwined like roles of old fashioned magnetic tape unwound and hopelessly tangled. **For McCoy... they must not detect my deception,** he pleaded, pressing handfuls of tape to his temples.

You pulled it off. You fooled them. McCoy capered in the mess to draw Spock's attention. See? he asserted, thumping his chest. You saved me. I'm as sound as a bulkhead!

The image of mental confusion faded and McCoy considered it to be one more demon banished when he found himself back at the sifter.

McCoy was buffeted by the waves of the machine's power. Spock had retreated deeper and deeper into his mind. McCoy followed. He was able to walk through the walls Spock was erecting as if he were a ghost. The mind sifter hummed behind them, battering at the barriers. As the fortresses fell, symbols swam lazily, sucked into the whirlpool caused by the sifter. Simple equations, common star charts, useless data... nothing important to the security of the Federation was consumed by the machine.

"Spock, wait for me," McCoy called as he lost sight of the rapidly retreating figure. The light became dimmer, almost completely gone as McCoy traveled further into the unfamiliar void. He felt his way along solid walls which burned his hands with freezing iciness. 'Logic', 'discipline', 'control' were transmitted to him, and he felt great pity for the Vulcan. He doubted that humans could have had such inhospitable defenses erected in their minds. That thought was quickly banished as he suddenly realized that his own defenses were just as forbidding and unyielding.

He came to an abrupt halt. The corridor ended. The light was completely extinguished. He knew a moment of panic. Was he lost here forever, trapped in Spock's mind? **Spock, where are you?** There was no reply. **Spock, it's me, Bones. I'll die here. Help me.**

The wall finally gave way and was re-erected behind him as he stepped through into a softly lit room. Spock was huddled in a corner with his hands covering his ears. McCoy rushed to his side and pulled him to his feet. The Vulcan looked as if he were being pursued, his movements jerky, his eyes darting back and forth.

It's coming! Do you hear it?

McCoy could discern a faint buzzing from behind the last barrier. **Spock, let's get out of here.**

Spock paced. **No. We're safe here. I think. Safe.**

Spock! McCoy said desperately, **This isn't real!**

But Spock wouldn't listen, and continued his frantic stride. McCoy glanced around. Three walls were lined with shelves stacked with memorabilia; a stuffed sehlat, a diploma from Starfleet Academy, a model of the Enterprise, a tricorder, medals of honor, a spore pod from Omicron Ceti III, a locked safe marked with the Federation symbol that McCoy guessed held the information Starfleet had entrusted to Spock. The fourth wall was a viewscreen. Images swirled and eddied as they changed. People appeared; Chris Pike in his days as Captain, Zarabeth, smiling and reaching out her arms, Amanda, and Jim. McCoy watched a scene that appeared over and over again. The Captain standing outside the shuttle, telling Spock to take care of Bones. Don't let anything happen to Bones. You know how he is. Come back safely.

McCoy was grabbed roughly from behind and spun away from the screen. Don't look! Spock cried.

Spock, we've got to get out of here now.

The sifter. Confused me. Question after question. Lie after lie. I can't remember what I told them! I'm not sure...

It's over. The Klingons got nothing from you. Your barriers were too strong and numerous. You barely let me in here!

How can you be sure? The taunts...

McCoy caught the Vulcan by the arms to stop the pacing. It's common knowledge that you're of mixed ancestry. Their insults were neither original nor clever. The sifter did not break through this last barrier!

But I hear it! Spock covered his ears again to block out the droning behind the wall.

Sure you hear it, but look around. Everything's in order. It didn't get through.

It can't get in. You are right. I must have withstood it, told them nothing. But it is still out there, and I don't seem to know how we can exit with this, he said, indicating the strongbox.

McCoy knew that he must reach him soon. This was the danger he had been warned of. The meld was out of control, and if this last barrier fell in Spock's nightmare world, they would both be consumed by the sifter. If it held, they would remain trapped in Spock's innermost sanctuary. McCoy gently took Spock's wrists and pulled his hands away from his ears.

Listen!

Spock shook his head in fear. I hear it. It's coming!

No! That's not the sifter you hear. Listen, it's a gurgling fountain. It's the sound of peepers on a warm spring evening."

Spock shook his head in denial.

"Yes!" McCoy insisted. "Come into my mind and you'll see. Trust me."

A final gleam of sanity ignited in Spock's eyes.

"Do you hear what I hear? Come on..."

They found themselves on a wide expanse of lawn before a large white house fronted by tall pillars. There was a porch wrapped around three sides of the old estate and, by the front door, an antique swing hung on rusted chains from the roof of the porch. McCoy led the silently complacent Vulcan up the steps and settled him in the wooden seat. He sat down and began the rocking motion, slowly gliding back and forth. The chains added their soft, rhythmic complaint for oil, and the sounds of a June evening in Georgia relaxed both men.

"You all right now?" the doctor asked finally. Spock nodded. Relief washed over McCoy as reason returned to his friend. His heel clanked against a heavy metal object beneath them. He pointed between the slats and Spock saw with relief that Starfleet's confidences had escaped with them intact. "Ready to go back?"

"It may be too late, Doctor."

McCoy slouched down comfortably, surprised by his own lack of concern. So this was it -- they had taken the chance, gambled and lost. Were their bodies already in an institution somewhere? Time ceased to have meaning. "Well, here we are, on a porch swing in the Georgia of my dreams. Forever. Just you and me," he chuckled, unaframed. "It was a good plan. We both knew what could happen. So no regrets, okay?"

Spock favored him with a softening of expression, close to a smile. "Regrets? I have many. I have failed the captain, and you." He leaned back and closed his eyes, releasing a weary sigh.

McCoy reached for the Vulcan's hand and grasped it tightly. "You haven't failed Jim and me. You kept me alive and I'm not insane. Jim would understand that you did all you could to protect me. But listen, you pointed-eared guardian elf, let me for once take some responsibility for myself, would you? We talked each other into this meld. And we succeeded... almost," he added with a trace of wistfulness. "There's got to be some way of getting back."

Spock did not reply. They continued to swing, the rhythm inducing drowsiness.

"When I was a boy," McCoy said after a few moments, "my Aunt Jo used to sit here with me on nights just like this. She'd tell me stories about this house and how she grew up in it." He smiled, recalling the pleasant memories.

"Doctor, if you insist on becoming maudlin, I must protest. I hardly find our situation acceptable." McCoy glanced at Spock in time to catch the inevitable eyebrow on the rise.

"Yeah, well anyway," he continued undaunted, his hand still clasping Spock's. "Aunt Jo used to go riding when she was a girl. I didn't have a pony when I was a kid. Always wanted one. Had an old mule, though. Used to pretend he was the finest racehorse in the county..." McCoy's voice droned on and on until they both nodded off to sleep, the swing cradling them in its comforting embrace.



McCoy woke slowly, warm and wrapped in what he thought was his Aunt Jo's quilt. He opened his eyes and beheld a pointed ear. He cleared his throat and tried to pull out of the firm embrace. "Spock, I'm getting a crick in my neck." He was immediately released.

"I am... relieved... to find you well, Doctor," Spock said with a tinge of embarrassment. "I was becoming concerned when you did not awaken after the meld was broken."

McCoy sat up and stretched. "How long have I been asleep?" he said around a yawn.

"2.74 hours."

"And you held me all that time?"

Spock looked uncomfortable. "It was you that would not release me."

McCoy grinned. "I see."

Spock raised a brow.

"Well, what do you think?" McCoy rubbed his hands together. "It worked, didn't it! I feel great!"

Spock stood and attempted to straighten his shirt with his badly swollen hands. "Indeed, however... unorthodox the method. I would not like to attempt it again."

McCoy rose to examine Spock's hands. They needed treatment. But first, he had to be sure of the Vulcan's recovery from the meld. "Speaking as your physician," Strange how good that sounds! "I would say that you have solved your personal dilemma. You know you didn't reveal any vital secrets to the Klingons. That final barrier held. And last, and certainly not least, you attained your own personal goal -- my safety!"

Spock allowed a marginal smile to lift the corners of his mouth. "I am pleased you have recovered sufficiently to make one of your inept attempts at psychoanalyzing me."

McCoy choked back a retort. "I'm still puzzled. We were firmly entrenched on that old swing. I was doing some heavy reminiscing. How the heck did you ever break the meld? I thought sure the strength to do it was beyond you."

Spock stiffened and folded his hands gingerly behind his back. McCoy did not miss the twinkle that showed in his eyes. "Another long-forgotten, little used Vulcan trait, Doctor. It seems there is a hidden well of energy that can be tapped in an emergency. For instance, when a Vulcan is bored beyond measure."

McCoy laughed, a strong, healthy, normal laugh. Rubbing a cramp out of his thigh, he made his way around the room, examining things he had never noticed before. "I feel so good I even want to get back to work. Those hands would be a good place to start. Let's get down to sickbay." He took a step towards the door and noticed Spock hadn't moved. "What the matter, don't you trust me?"

Spock shook his head. "It is not that. I doubt if..."

"Oh, I forgot. I'm not recertified yet." Crestfallen, McCoy lounged against the wall. "Too bad, since I'm kinda responsible for what happened, I'd like to fix you up. Besides, this may be a little difficult for us to explain."

Chewing his lower lip in thought, Spock considered. "I believe there is a way. The lifeboats are well equipped with medical supplies. If we entered the docking bay unobserved, you could apply your black arts in privacy."

McCoy opened the door. "You're only getting away with that crack cause you just had a good idea. They have recorders on lifeboats, too, don't they?"

Spock nodded.

"Just remembered. I got a tape from Jim a couple of days ago." He turned back and crossed the room and picked up the tape in the corner. "I think it's about time I caught him up on what's been happening."

"I, too, received a message from him. I would like to send my greetings along with yours."

"Sure. Now where do these Vulcans keep blank cartridges?"

Spock pointed mutely to the floor where McCoy had dropped the case the night before.

"Oh, I forgot." McCoy smiled sheepishly as he picked it up and drew out a blank cartridge. He returned to the door and waved Spock through. "Lead on. You know this ship better than I do."

Spock walked slowly through the corridors, compensating for McCoy's labored gait.

"I'm really looking forward to this," the doctor enthused. "It's kinda like the day I pressed my first hypo home, or the time I sliced open my first abdomen, or the time I drew my first sample of your funny green blood."

"Be quiet," Spock hissed. "Have you forgotten about the acuity of Vulcan hearing? If you insist on so loudly proclaiming our intentions, our plain will most certainly be aborted."

McCoy sulked as the turbolift doors closed behind them. "You could have just said be quiet, killjoy."

Encountering no difficulties as they completed their stealthy journey to the ship's aft section, Spock opened the door of one of the lifeboats and relocked it behind them. McCoy rummaged through the medical supplies until he found what he needed. He worked eagerly, both excited and a little nervous. Since the wounded hands had gone so long without treatment, he could not eliminate the swelling and discoloration. He looked at the completed job, disappointed that it wasn't perfect.

"That's the best I can do. First time I'm doctoring in six months and it looks like I've forgotten everything I learned. But we waited too long..."

Spock flexed the fingers as far as he could. "On the contrary. You have eliminated the pain and prevented infection. Now I can hasten the natural healing process myself. At the risk of inflating your ego, I might even venture to suggest that Healer Somm could not have done as much."

McCoy beamed with pride. "Give him a break. He's just a beginner."

Spock's brow rose into his bangs in exasperation. "We cannot remain here indefinitely. Don't we have a tape to compose?"

McCoy produced the tape and Spock indicated the recorder mounted in a side compartment. Dropping it in, McCoy pressed a blue button bearing the universal record symbol and immediately began. Spock settled back, content to listen to his friend's enthusiastic chatter.

"Yeah, it's me, Jim. A little skinnier and a little meaner, but believe it or not, these Vulcans have got me started on the comeback trail. There isn't that much to say, but when Starfleet sends you my way again, plan on some long, tall tales. You've probably saved up a few to bend my ear with, too."

"Just one thing before Spock puts his two credits in. I just realized how good it was to have clean hair. For six months, it felt like slimy swamp grass on itchy ground. Now, instead of scratching, I keep running my fingers through it just because it feels good."

"And the beds. They feel like lying in some sweet lady's arms after sleepin on the floor for so long."

"Speaking of sleep, you don't know what a luxury it is to sleep until I'm good and ready to get up. The staff isn't as charmin as my bunch, but at least they don't get me up at 0600 hours to inquire if my bowels have moved the way they did in ancient history."

"Oh, and how is my bunch, and everyone else, too? Tell whoever thinks he's been running my sickbay not to get too used to it, cause I'll be kickin him out pretty soon."

"They've been giving me the green carpet treatment. Get it? Green carpet treatment. The head hauncho himself has been handlin my case. He's not a bad doctor, for a kid. In my line, there are always new breakthroughs. I'm going to have to get Somm to fill me in on what he just picked up at doctor school. He gave me a little gadget to help me get my space legs back the other day. I don't need it but I'll give it a try to keep him happy seeing as how he's so concerned and all. I'll help him field test his new toy."

"Speakin of toys, tell Starfleet the Klingons have overrated their damned mind sifter. It's a mean machine, but contrary to their false advertising, it doesn't annihilate a human mind. I'm proof that we're tougher than they give us credit for."

"What I've really got to get caught up on is my eating. I'm so scrawny. I'd look like a scarecrow If I tried to put on my uniform now. I'll tell you what I miss -- my flashy shorts. My charisma isn't the same without them. Oh, but the Vulcans try. NO, they do, but their food isn't much better than the Klingon slop we used to get."

"Spock, get over here and say hi to Jim, and make it snappy. Sorry Spock won't have much time to talk. I want him to help me sabotage the food processors so I can get a decent meal. Gettin hungry."

Spock had come up behind him. When Captain Kirk received the tape, he would see his first officer appear, wearing the familiar, long-suffering expression he often adopted when in McCoy's company. Beside the angular face, a puffy, discolored hand rose attempting a barely recognizable imitation of the Vulcan salute.

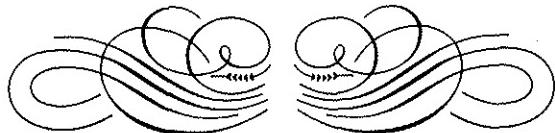
"Jim doesn't want to see that," McCoy admonished, shoving the hand out of viewing range. "Don't let that worry you, Jim. I've been going around being mad at this whole ship. Spock just got mad at my desk."

Spock elbowed McCoy aside. "Greetings, Captain," he began in a relaxed voice. "As you see, we are both recovering and are most anxious to join you."

"Did you hear that, Jim?" McCoy interrupted. "My stomach just growled. Jim doesn't want to hear a two hour documentary on our prison days. ... Not when we can tell him when we get home. Let's go, I'm hungry."

Spock restrained McCoy's hand, which was reaching for the off control. Pointedly turning away from McCoy, he addressed the machine again. "Captain, while I appreciate Starfleet's efforts in recovering us, I submit that it may have been a mistake for them to rescue Leonard."

Spock allowed the connection to be broken, but not before Kirk would hear McCoy's healthy, almost jubilant slanderous sputtering.



*"Monsters come in many forms. And do you know
the greatest monster of them all?
Guilt."*

-- Obsession



INSTANT REPLAY

By: Sandy Zier

Art: Mary Mills

James Kirk was looking forward, for once, to a routine survey mission. The experience on Excalbia proved both physically and emotionally tiring, though it had been interesting to have "met" Abraham Lincoln -- one of his heroes. He was sure Spock had also been 'fascinated' by meeting Surak -- the father of Vulcan civilization.

The Enterprise had established orbit around Cooke's Planet to drop off the survey party. Kirk had decided that he, Spock and McCoy would go along even though they were not necessary personnel. It could serve as a shore leave -- in a manner of speaking. The Enterprise would then leave to rendezvous with a cargo ship to transfer supplies and return in a couple of days to retrieve them.

Kirk was giving his final, last-minute orders to Scotty, who would take charge in his absence, when Spock and McCoy entered the bridge.

"Look, Spock, Vulcan logic doesn't always work, as you saw on Excalbia." McCoy was saying as they exited the turbolift. "Sometimes even 'good' has to fight for what it believes in, when there is no other choice."

"Doctor McCoy, there are always alternatives to violence." Spock stated matter-of-factly.

"You and your 'always alternatives'... don't you understand anything I've been saying? Even the best of people have been known to throw a punch on occasion."

"Gentlemen", Kirk interrupted, "are you ready to beam down to the planet?"

"Yes, Captain," answered Spock, immediately regaining his Vulcan stature. "The science team is ready and all necessary supplies have already been sent to the planet surface."

"I don't know why I need to go along," McCoy grumbled. "This is just a routine survey mission... nothing that requires a CMO. It's just another time my atoms are going to be scattered all over creation!"

"I want both of you there. That's reason enough, don't you think?" Kirk answered with authority, then smiled and added, "This could mean some of that famous

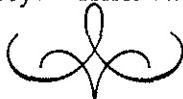
'rest and relaxation' you've been after me to get, Bones -- you should be along to supervise and make sure I don't get into trouble."

"Okay, I guess I'll go." McCoy reluctantly agreed. "However, it's Spock I'll probably have to look after."

Spock started to reply, but was interrupted by the Captain giving his last orders to Mr. Scott. The triad headed towards the turbolift when Kirk turned around to the Engineer, "See you in a few days, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, sir. Don't worry about the Enterprise, Captain. I'll take good care of her." The chief engineer always looked forward to a chance to take charge of 'his' ship.

"I know she's in good hands, Scotty." Kirk said as the turbolift doors closed.



After their shelter was set up, the science team proceeded with their survey. Spock was about to join them when Kirk called him back.

"Spock, there's no need for you to handle routine survey work. Besides, we didn't come down here to work, remember? Your people are capable of handling the job. Come sit down." Kirk was pouring a brandy for the doctor and himself.

"Very well." Spock went to the shelter and donned a warm jacket, since the planet was in the middle of what would equal earth's fall season. He then joined the two men.

"What was that you two were arguing about on the bridge earlier?" The Captain asked.

Spock was the first to answer. "I was not arguing, Captain. I was merely making the observation that fighting is not necessary... there are always alternatives..."

"Dammit, Spock... you were down on Excalbia... Yarnek put you and Jim to a test." McCoy interrupted. "How in the world could you say, after that experience, that violence is never an alternative? Even the most peaceful and good-hearted of men can be provoked into violence."

"I think we have all seen enough provocation and fighting to concede that violence is sometimes a necessary fact, Spock. Even with your logical mind, you must see that." Kirk added. "Aggressive behavior has always had a knack for bringing out the worst in people... not only in serious fighting, but in recreation as well."

"I do not see the logic in your statement Captain." Spock, as usual, was outnumbered; however, as always, he stood his ground. "Though I agree aggression can precipitate violence without the presence of controlled logic, I do not see it's place in recreation. Recreation is a time for play for humans, though it serves no purpose in Vulcan culture."

"What would you call the gladiator games we saw on Planet 892-IV? That was recreation to those people, just as they were in Rome on our own Earth. There are other forms of recreation that can lead to violence. In fact, there's an earth game, called football -- it was known as a 'contact' sport because it involved tackling." Kirk's

thoughts seemed to wander. "Many people were injured, though not intentionally. My father and I, when I was young, played a form of football called 'touch-football' -- a lot less violent and a lot more fun."

"I know the game you're talking about Jim," McCoy added. "My grandfather used to talk about the games -- they were played in places similar to the arena we saw on Planet 892-IV. He'd talk about times when everything stood still for the games -- cities were crime-free, stores would close, major political events were often postponed because of football games."

"Yes," Kirk said. "They were much like the gladiator games, but on a much more civilized level. And, unlike the gladiator games, where the goal was the death of an opponent, football's goal was to score points. People were paid for playing the game."

"There is no logic in receiving compensation for recreation -- nor in having major events interrupted because of a game." Spock's eyebrow was raised. "Games are for competition and developing skill... not for violent or aggressive behavior."

"And I guess you never become irritated while playing chess with me," Kirk interrupted with a grin. He then continued before his First Officer could protest. "I have a great idea!" Kirk flipped open his communicator and called in the science team. "We're going to have a football game in the morning," he said, putting his communicator away, "-- only touch football, mind you. But I will show you, Spock, just how provoking a game can get."

Spock and McCoy looked at each other. McCoy objected to Kirk's idea adamantly. "Look, Jim, I choose not to take part in this. Southern Gentlemen don't play football!". McCoy had no desire whatsoever to run up and down playing such a game -- he had more interesting things he would rather do. "And, besides, you'll never convince Spock, anyway."

Spock agreed with McCoy, "Captain, I see no reason to play football... a game I have no knowledge of and, I am sure, neither does most of the landing party."

"I'll explain the rules, as I remember them. They don't have to be detailed -- after all, this is only a 'friendly' game." Refusing to take no for an answer, Kirk continued, "Since there are 13 of us here, Bones, you'll get a reprieve. Besides, there's always the remote possibility we may need your services."

"Good. That settles that!" McCoy was rather surprised, though pleased at the ease at which he got out of that one. "I'll go take some samples of the water and other food supplies... I don't want to be around watching you two making fools of yourselves playing touch football."

"Captain, I must protest... we can't indulge in an activity we know nothing about..." Spock tried to dissuade the Captain. However, he knew there would be no changing Kirk's mind, now that it was made up.

Once everyone had returned, Kirk informed them of the plans. Spock would captain one team, Kirk the other.

At that news, Spock attempted, once again, to protest. "Captain..."

"Spock, are you trying to tell me you're afraid I might beat you?" Come on, where's your sense of daring?" Kirk asked, with a cunning glint in his eyes.

Spock was obviously a bit taken back. "Captain, I see no reason why you would think my reluctance to play is a result of apprehension on my part as to whether I would win."

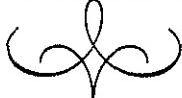
"You're just scared you'll be shown up by a human!" Kirk teased.

A Vulcan eyebrow rose. "Very well, Captain, if I must take part in your game, I would advise you to explain the rules so that I may plan a strategy for winning." However reluctant, Spock finally conceded to the Captain's demands.

Kirk proceeded to explain the rules to the entire group -- at least those he could remember. However, there was one problem. He turned to his First Officer. "Spock, we need a football to play with. See what you can come up with. It was covered in leather and was somewhat oblong in shape." Kirk drew an outline in the dirt of a football as he remembered it. "This is about the size and shape, Spock. It doesn't have to be exact."

"Captain, where do you propose I come up with the materials to make such an object?" Spock asked.

"Indulge yourself, Spock. Just be sure to come up with one before the big game!"



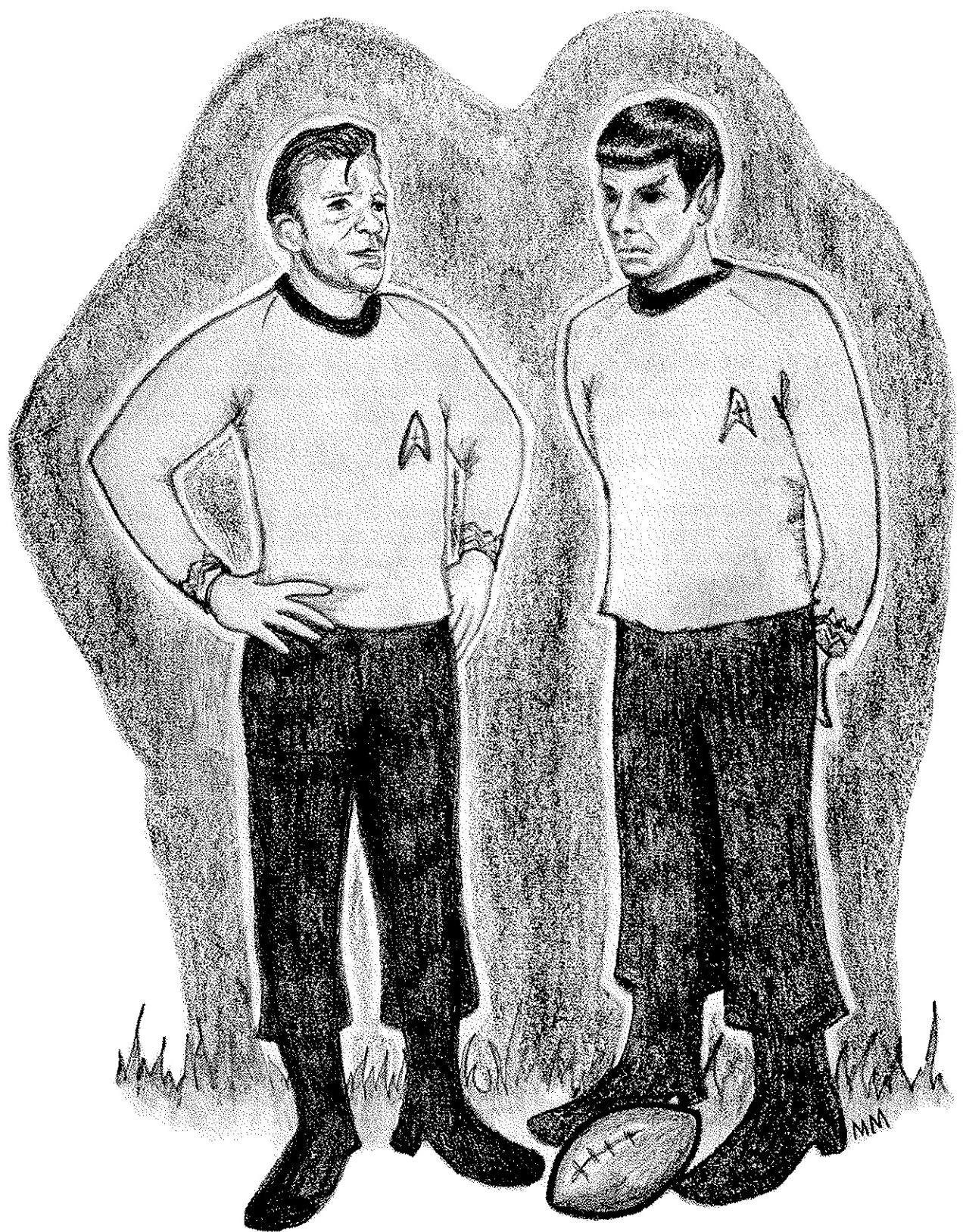
The make-shift football game had gotten underway without too much difficulty. Spock had constructed a rather decent football, though Kirk wasn't sure whether or not he wanted to ask what it was made of. The science team seemed to enjoy a chance to have a little fun. Spock's team was leading. Not surprising, Kirk thought, he would have a fighting chance with any game that uses strategy. But there must be some way I can get him to react physically, rather than using his head all the time.

Kirk's team had the ball. He had been trying to provoke Spock into doing something "illogical," but to no avail as yet. Kirk was playing the position of quarterback when his team had control of the ball. The other players had gradually become caught up in the spirit of the game. Even Spock seemed to relax. The Captain decided it was time to change things.

Up until now, he had settled for merely handing the ball off and having a teammate run with the ball until he was 'touched'. That had served to warm up the crewmembers. Now it was time for a little action. Kirk wanted to try passing the ball to a man downfield. He explained this to his teammates, while stressing the importance of three men staying back to protect him until he threw the ball.

The first time Kirk attempted such a pass-play, the ball dropped to the ground. Spock voiced his disapproval. "Captain, that was not logical... you have changed your strategy in the middle of the game."

"Yes, that's true. As I do in chess... or at least as you accuse me of doing in chess. And, as it is in chess, it is perfectly fair in football as well." Kirk wanted to laugh at his First Officer's apparent irritation at Kirk's sudden change in game plan.



Spock debated further. "Yes. However, unlike chess, this is a more physically demanding game and thus, has a higher degree of risk."

"Don't forget, you have to catch me before you 'touch' me. This will open up a whole new realm of possibilities. Now let's get this game going. No more interruptions!"

The Vulcan conferred with his team. "Let me defend against the Captain." Then I know he will be safe from injury, he added to himself.

After two more attempts at passing the ball, Spock was obviously becoming more frustrated at the way the game was going. Kirk was successfully dodging the Vulcan's attempts to control his movement; however, his teammates could not seem to keep hold of the ball. On one occasion, Kirk had taunted Spock as he sidestepped the Vulcan's move to hinder his game. He had noticed Spock going back to his side of the field with one of his infamous looks of irritation on his face. "Looks like I'm getting to him now, he had thought to himself.

This was Kirk's last chance. He plotted out the play, only allowing for one man, instead of three, to stay back to protect him. Kirk dropped back to pass and saw Spock coming towards him. He sidestepped the Vulcan's initial attempt at catching him and ran to his left, seeking out his intended target. Spock had a difficult time keeping up with his Captain, who was proving to be a very agile opponent.

Kirk caught a glimpse of his First Officer's pursuit as he raised his arm to throw the ball. Spock, in an attempt to block the pass, lunged towards Kirk. Doing so caused him to momentarily lose his balance and his momentum carried him into his Captain.

Kirk suddenly felt his right foot plant on the grass as he went down, causing his leg to buckle under him. He felt a searing pain in his leg, running up to his hip. Simultaneously, both Spock and the Captain heard the snap of bones breaking.

Kirk choked back a scream. Spock, upon noticing the angular deformity of Kirk's right leg, and the extreme loss of blood, immediately jumped to his feet to seek out McCoy, who was nowhere to be seen. Why does McCoy always have a predilection for not being around when he's needed, Spock thought to himself, panic growing in the Vulcan's usually calm manner. And why did I allow such a frivolous thing as a football game to cause me to lose my control -- even if only for a moment -- a moment that has now caused injury to Jim. Spock tried the communicator to reach McCoy, but was unsuccessful. He returned his attention to his Captain.

"Captain... Jim, please stay still. I will send one of the men to search for Dr. McCoy." Spock turned to direct one of the ensigns to find the doctor. Kirk's leg was obviously broken -- both bones in his lower leg had penetrated the skin and the leg was bent at an angle totally unnatural for a human. Dirt had gotten into the wound and he was in intense pain. "Captain, I apologize... I didn't realize what I was doing..." Spock, for one of the few times in his life, was at a loss for words. He placed his hands gently on Kirk's shoulders, wanting to help but being unable to.

Trying not to pass out from the severity of the pain, Kirk whispered, "Spock, it wasn't your fault... I made you play..." He was not able to finish his sentence.

The First Officer of the Enterprise could only support his friend while they awaited McCoy's help. He felt helpless -- and frustrated -- able to do nothing more

than lend comfort to his friend. Despite his scientific expertise, Spock had no knowledge of the first aid of such an injury. He did know that shock was imminent, yet to stop the bleeding prematurely could result in closure of some of the tissue and a severe infection. All he had left to do was to hold onto Kirk, and wait.



The ensign found McCoy taking a swim in a nearby stream. "Dr. McCoy, Commander Spock wants you to return immediately. There's been an injury... Commander Spock..."

McCoy interrupted the ensign. "What kind of injury? A sprain perhaps... of their egos?" he asked sarcastically as he got out of the water. Since he had had time to think, he had become somewhat ego-bruised -- he had gotten out of the game without any kind of protest... apparently this was one of those times his presence was not important. Although he understood... at the same time he did feel somewhat left out. He would come, immediately, of course, since he could never know what really may have happened -- or how serious it was. As he gathered his belongings, he added, "well whatever it is, I'll take care of it, as usual." McCoy, although glad to have gotten out of the tomfoolery, was a bit miffed at the ease at which he accomplished it -- after all, if he wasn't wanted around, why did Kirk insist he come down here in the first place?

"But, sir," the ensign tried to explain, "Commander Spock accidentally knocked the Captain down -- his leg..."

McCoy immediately changed his tone. "He what?!! Why didn't you say something in the first place... !" His bruised ego aside, his duty and love for his friends took over. Those fools, he thought, can't leave them alone for a minute.



McCoy found Kirk lying on the ground, Spock supporting his shoulders. Kirk's leg was still bleeding, jagged ends of bone protruding through the wound's edges.

"Spock, I mean it... it will be fine, as soon as McCoy gets here. It wasn't your fault!" Kirk attempted to reassure the Vulcan.

"What in blazes were you two doing?" McCoy demanded of Spock as he approached the scene. "It was only a game of touch football!!."

"Bones, quiet. Don't be so hard on Spock." Kirk said, with obvious effort on his part. "I was the one who pushed him to..."

Ignoring Kirk momentarily, he focused his attention on the Captain's injury. McCoy took one look at the leg and said, "I'll have to splint the leg with plasti-foam -- luckily there is some in the emergency kit we brought down." Then, gruffly he added, "I don't care what you say, Jim. Damned Vulcan logic and control..."

"Is there anything I can do to assist, Doctor?" Spock asked quietly.

"Yeah, you can pray the infection doesn't spread too fast." McCoy's thoughts were racing. I don't have enough antibiotics here to treat a full-scale systemic infection. And this wound -- I'll be lucky if I can clean it up enough to prevent gangrene from developing before the Enterprise returns." McCoy was furious -- at himself for

not staying around to have prevented this, at Spock for letting it happen, and at Kirk for suggesting the whole thing in the first place.

The rest of the landing party was staying out of the way so as to not cause trouble, yet close enough to keep abreast of what was happening. They were all on pins and needles. This apparently had been more than recreation... and for such an injury to occur...

A noise distracted McCoy. "What are you all doing?!" he yelled. "Can't you see I need help. Go find some water and heat it with one of your phasers. I'll need some cloth -- find something and tear it up. NOW!"

By the time McCoy was ready to straighten the leg, Kirk had fallen into a state of semi-consciousness. "Just as well," McCoy remarked. "I can't sedate him until he is stabilized and the blood loss is minimal." He had administered as much pain killer as he could. Who would have thought they might have needed a general anesthetic?

Spock offered silent comfort, supporting Kirk's shoulders. He wanted the pain to be his... not to feel the guilt he was experiencing for injuring the Captain. He could do nothing else, though, but to lend support.

McCoy finished up cleaning the wound as best he could and splinted the leg with the plasti-foam. He wiped the back of his hand on his brow and stood up. Kirk momentarily regained consciousness.

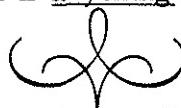
"Not... your... fault Spock..." he tried to say, but the words would not come and he succumbed to the effects of the pain killers combined with the loss of blood.

"I will stay with him, Doctor. I will call you should the Captain's condition change." What the Vulcan was unable to say was communicated through his actions.

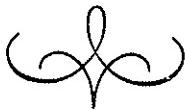
"Too bad I wasn't called before..." McCoy started another retort, but thought better of it. "I'm worried, Spock. I don't have the proper supplies to take care of this. The wound is too dirty to close -- infection has probably already entered his bloodstream. I was lucky to have brought that plasti-foam to use as a splint."

"Is there anything I can do for him now?"

"Well," McCoy was thinking it would be best not to leave Kirk just yet; however, Spock was definitely uncomfortable with him around. "I'll be around here Spock, maybe I can find some mosses and roots to make a salve... you should rouse him every so often to make sure he is oriented. Call me if anything changes."



McCoy remembered an 'old country medicine' remedy of using a poultice made with local roots and mosses; however, since nothing was known about this planet, who could tell what was in the plants -- and if it would be suitable for such a use? No, it wasn't worth a risk, he thought. He may end up infecting the Captain with something totally alien to his medical knowledge. He had better stick to basic medical principles. He glanced over at his two friends. He decided he had better let up on the Vulcan. He knew Spock already felt badly enough. It was a stupid game, McCoy thought. The injury was an accident -- but it was an unnecessary one. McCoy could not dwell on that at the moment. Kirk was his main concern -- and the wound in the leg was a bad one.



McCoy reacted to Spock's voice calling him immediately. The Vulcan was still sitting with Kirk's head in his lap. The Captain was asleep, but a closer look showed the Captain flushed and perspiring.

"Doctor, I believe you should come and attend the Captain." Spock said, controlled yet with some anguish in his voice.

McCoy went over and ran the mediscanner over the prone body. Kirk was running a fever -- a high one. In addition, the wound was red, hot and swollen. The infection was spreading and Kirk was becoming delirious.

"Jim, wake up!" McCoy demanded, as he firmly slapped the human's face. "Spock, he's got to be awakened... get him oriented." He paused for a moment. "We should keep hot compresses on the wound -- that will increase the blood supply to the wound itself. Maybe if we took him down by that stream... we could cool down his body and have the water at our fingertips. Hopefully, we can keep him cool enough until the Enterprise returns this evening."

"The ship's status... Mr... Sp...." Kirk's delirium was evident. He attempted to move. "I need to get... to the bridg..."

"You'll go nowhere, Jim," McCoy insisted. "Keep still. You're on Cooke's Planet -- we came for a routine mission. There was an accident..." McCoy glanced at Spock, who avoided the doctor's glare. "Your leg is broken. We're going to move you now, so please stay still and let us do the work."

"Spock... Bones... my leg... hurts..." Kirk, again, tried to use his arms to lift his body off the ground. "What did I do... why the pain...?"

"Captain, I injured your leg. I'm sorry. I should have never..."

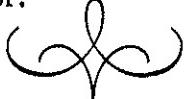
"That's right, Spock, on one count. Neither of you should have done anything... all this just because both of you are as stubborn as a mule!"

Kirk fidgeted again, which brought McCoy back to the matter at hand. "Come on, Spock. Let's get him moved down to the stream." With the help of the rest of the landing party, Kirk was moved to the stream, along with the emergency gear.

The rest of the day seemed to last forever, as McCoy kept the leg wound as clean as possible, using up what antibiotics he had brought. Spock kept his silent vigil, keeping Kirk's flushed face cool with water from the stream. Kirk occasionally would mumble some nonsense words. What little conversation passed between McCoy and Spock consisted mainly of instructions from the doctor or progress reports. The Vulcan had withdrawn into a shell of guilt over his friend's injury. Besides, McCoy was too angry over the stupidity of what had happened to hold a civil discussion. Rather than lash out with words he knew he would regret, he chose to keep quiet, for once. Spock did not need to hear him verbalize what the Vulcan was already feeling -- anguish... guilt... a total responsibility he had accepted for Kirk's injury. McCoy realized that the Vulcan's guilt would have to be dealt with. Such a stupid thing, McCoy thought. Kirk wanting to prove something to Spock, Spock giving into the challenge. Now they were fighting to save Kirk's leg and avoid a severe infection using primitive means until the ship returned.

"Doctor," McCoy's thoughts were interrupted. "the Enterprise is due back in 3.4 hours. I would suggest we prepare the Captain for transport back to the beam-down point."

McCoy knew Spock was anxious -- more so than himself. He agreed, even though the trip was only a short distance. Kirk was stable at least... their somewhat basic treatment had toned down the fever. McCoy had finally been able to sedate Kirk, with the danger of shock no longer a factor.



"Jim, you can't get out of that bed yet. Your leg isn't ready. It can't support your full weight..." McCoy was admonishing his patient for his usual desire to not follow doctor's orders.

"Bones, it's been five days since the accident, I have to exercise it sometimes. The infection is gone and the bones are healed -- you said so yourself."

"Yes, Jim, but with the extent of the injury... the infection.. the trans-skeletal electrostimulation may have been hindered. Give the bones and muscles a chance to recoup some strength." McCoy was not sure why he was so hesitant. Everything checked out all right. Maybe his reluctance had something to do with the fact Spock had not been around since they had come back aboard the ship. His thoughts, however, were interrupted by the subject of his mind's wanderings.

"Captain, I trust you are well," Spock stated in a very stoic manner.

Kirk hid his pleasure -- and surprise -- at Spock's sudden appearance. "Yes, in fact I've been trying to convince the good doctor of just that."

"Captain, I suggest you heed Doctor McCoy's suggestions. The break was severe and..."

"Just what I need," Kirk interrupted, "another mother hen. Spock, don't worry about me, everything's okay. How's everything going with the Enterprise?"

"Everything is fine, Captain." Spock paused, then continued. "Captain... Jim... I must apologize for causing the injury to your leg. I let my desire to be successful get in the way of my wanting to avoid endangering your safety."

"But, Spock," Kirk started. "It was an accident... a fluke..."

"No, Captain. I was not logical during the game. The result was your injury. I did not act with logic... I wanted to win."

"So, Spock, "McCoy interjected. "You admit that aggressive behavior can be provoked... even in the most logical of people?"

"Yes, doctor, it would seem so." Spock had no inclination to partake in one of his interplays with the chief medical officer. "I will admit that when one is dealing with humans, one cannot predict what will result. I regret causing the Captain's injury."

Kirk had been forewarned by Dr. McCoy of Spock's anguish over his accident. "Spock, let me ask you something." Kirk said.

"Yes, Captain."

"Is there any game... any activity Vulcans participate in -- either as competition or as some kind of training?" Kirk asked.

"Yes. As children, before the Kahs-wan, we are trained in survival techniques, defense and strategy." Spock answered.

"And, do you mean to tell me," Kirk continued, "that no one, even inadvertently, ever gets injured?"

"Of course not, Captain. Accidents do occur. By the sheer nature of the activity..."

"Then, Mr. Spock, you must realize that such games as football, and other recreational activities, can easily lend themselves to mishaps. Especially when a person puts 100% effort into the activity... such accidents will happen. You have to accept that, Spock. My injury was an accident -- it was not your fault." Kirk tried to get through to his stubborn friend.

"You must also that everyone taking part in a physical activity is taking a risk." Kirk knew there would probably be no convincing his Vulcan friend until he was up and about. They would have to deal with it over time.

"Yes, Captain, I suppose it was merely an accident." Spock replied. He had no desire to carry on a long discussion on the subject of his Captain's injury — he may logically agree that there was no way to prevent it, but it was something he still felt regret over. "Would you care to accompany me to the bridge?" Spock looked at McCoy for approval.

The doctor agreed, "Yes, I guess it's as good a time as any to try out that leg. Just don't do anything too strenuous for a few days. Better take this cane, just in case your leg tires during the next couple of days.

Kirk waved the cane off, but accepted it reluctantly when he was met with a glare from McCoy. He cautiously stood and put weight on his leg, experiencing only a twinge of tightness in the muscles. He then headed towards the door, with Spock following. At the door he stopped and turned. "Oh, by the way... when the three of us have some spare time, how about a friendly game of basketball? Kirk grinned and ducked out of sickbay before the water McCoy had thrown at him could reach its target.

"It seems, Spock," McCoy said, "we are going to have to watch out for our friend."

"Indeed." Spock stated simply, with one eyebrow raised sharply.



Christopher's Criterion

There was I,
One lonely grain of sand
On the endless stretch of the beach
Of Humanity.
No one to celebrate as I walked by,
And no one to herald the contributions
I made to this life.
Why am I here, God...?
If, indeed, a God there be.
Was I so small that even You
Overlooked the seeds I had sown
In my journey?

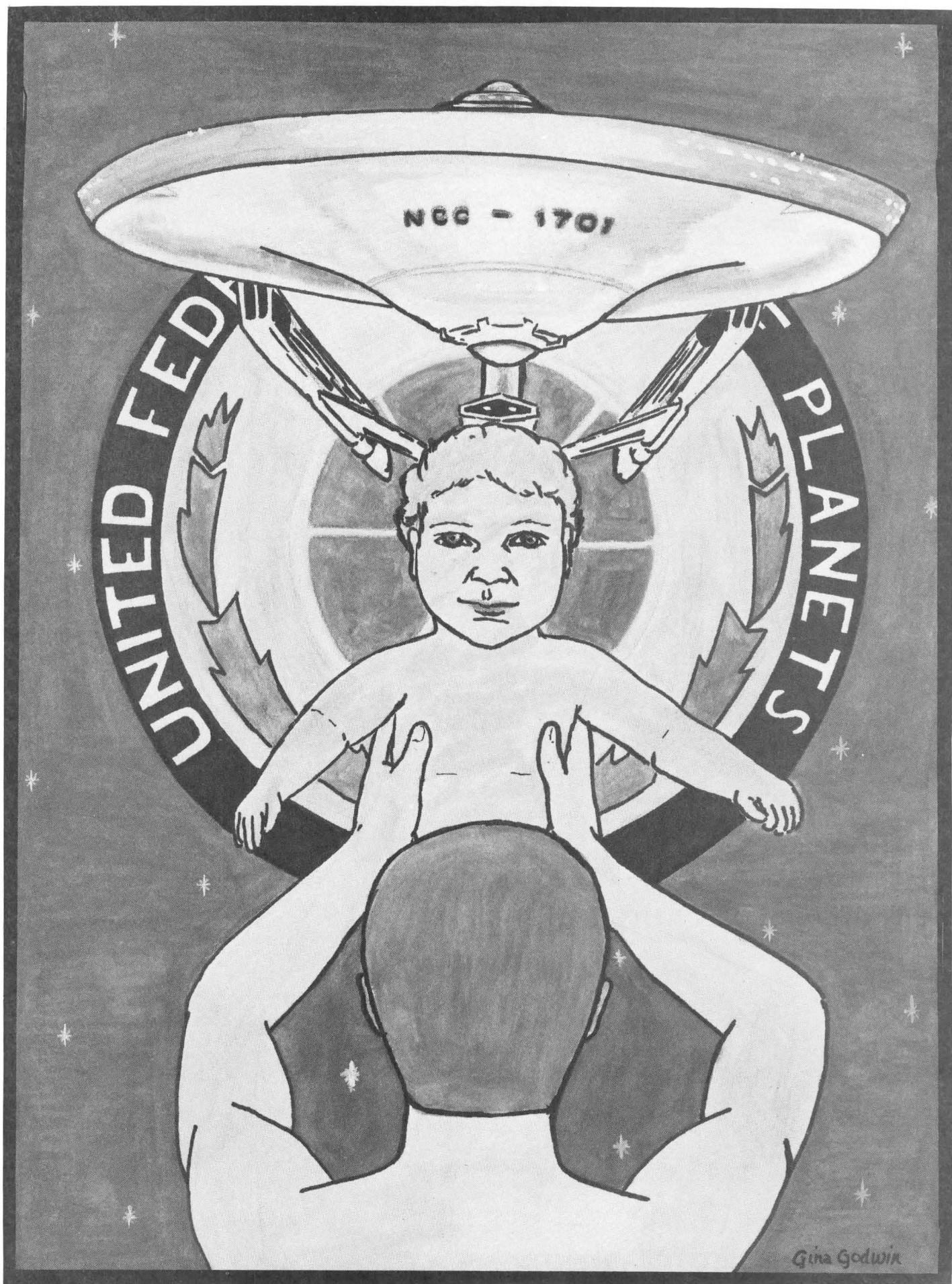


By: Betsy Fisher

Art: Gina Godwin

There will be no continent named in my honor.
No city, no song...
Not even a flower.
No "X" will mark the spot
Upon the Earth as indelible proof of my passage.
No head will turn in sudden recognition
Should my name be mentioned
by someone
After the years have gone.
This I know,
And yet, I ask not that such favor be my reward,
For it is in this life
That I must celebrate the truth of my Humanity,
And know that one day
My son,
Colonel Shawn Jeffrey Christopher,
shall boldly go where I have only dreamed of going;
To be the first to leave footprints
On the sands of some other world,
And to extend to whomever may reside there,
The open hand of friendship.

Then my spirit will bask in the setting sun of
My recurring dream
And reach out across time and the universe to say:
"Thanks, Captain Jim Kirk, for passing me by until
The time was right... and thanks
For the look ahead!"
Thanks, somebody, for showing me that this chance
for tolerance and diversity
Is bequeathed to my future son.
On that golden day when I dreamed I visited
Your shining ship of magic and quicksilver,
I learned also, to believe in "Little Green Men"
And wry physicians with miracles at their fingertips.
My spirit rejoices still, and I will forever understand
That my life on this Earth did not exist in vain...
And I guess there really must be a God
After all!



Gina Godwin

SPECULATION

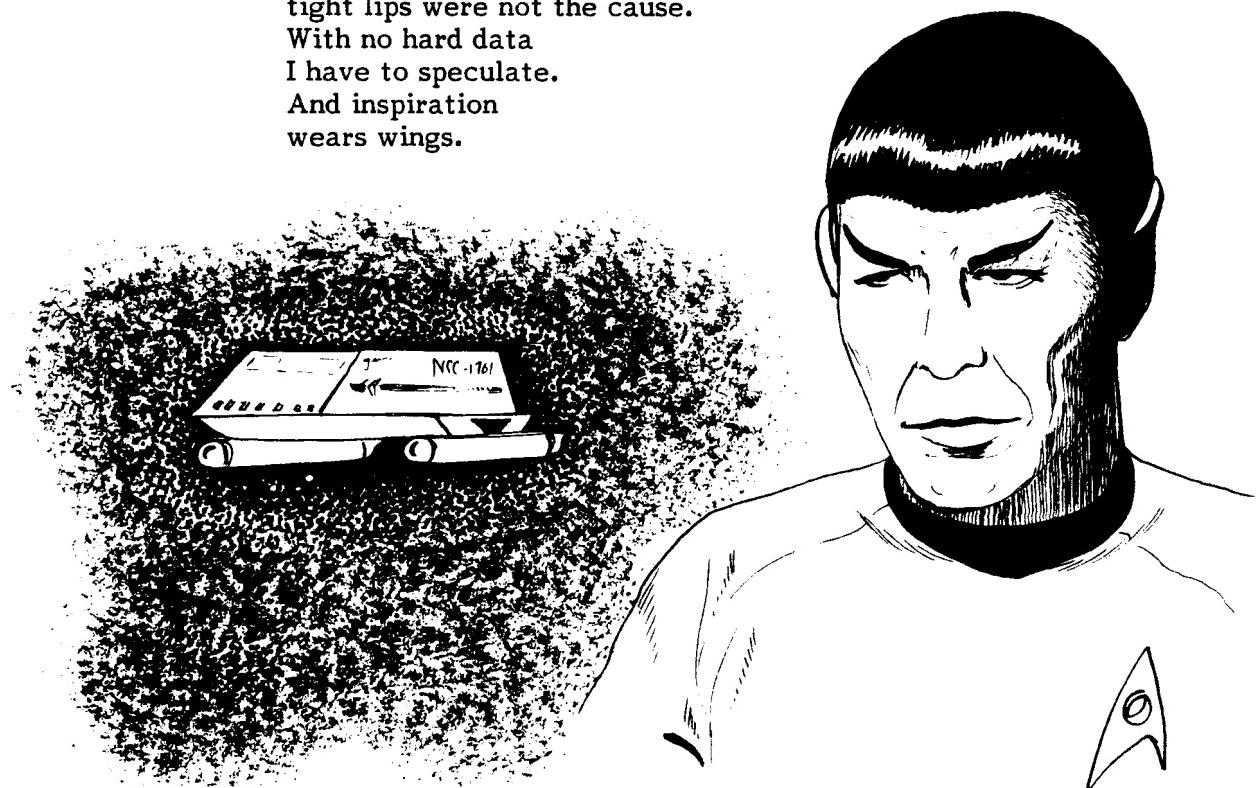
*ON THE EXISTENCE
OF TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENA*

By: Jane Yambe
Art: Gennie Summers

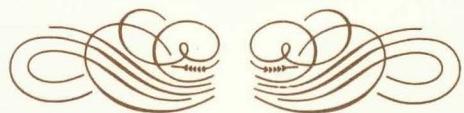
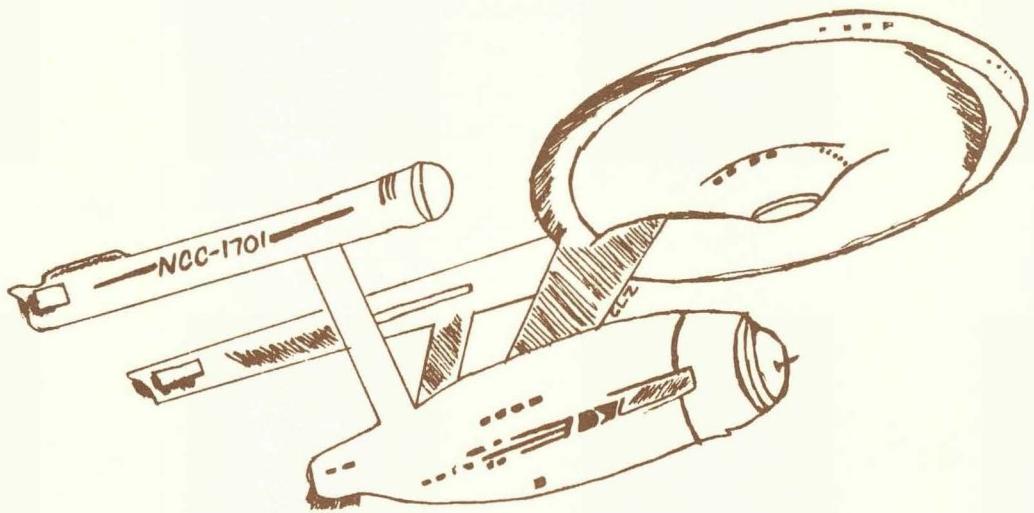
"The Enterprise is surely
on course for Makus III by now.
And I, for one,
do not believe in angels."

Spock: "The Galileo Seven"

There was a time
when I was quick to discount
those elusive spirits.
Yet transporter beams alone
did not wrench us from flames.
Faith and quicksilver
set in motion
uncovered our plight
Gilded feet had to fly.
Loathe I was to speak
upon the bridge after,
tight lips were not the cause.
With no hard data
I have to speculate.
And inspiration
wears wings.

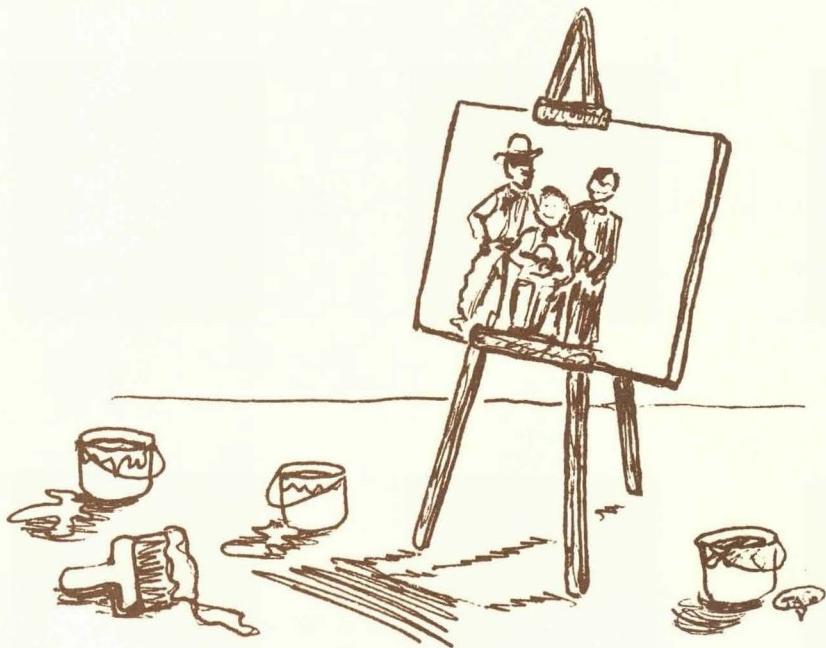


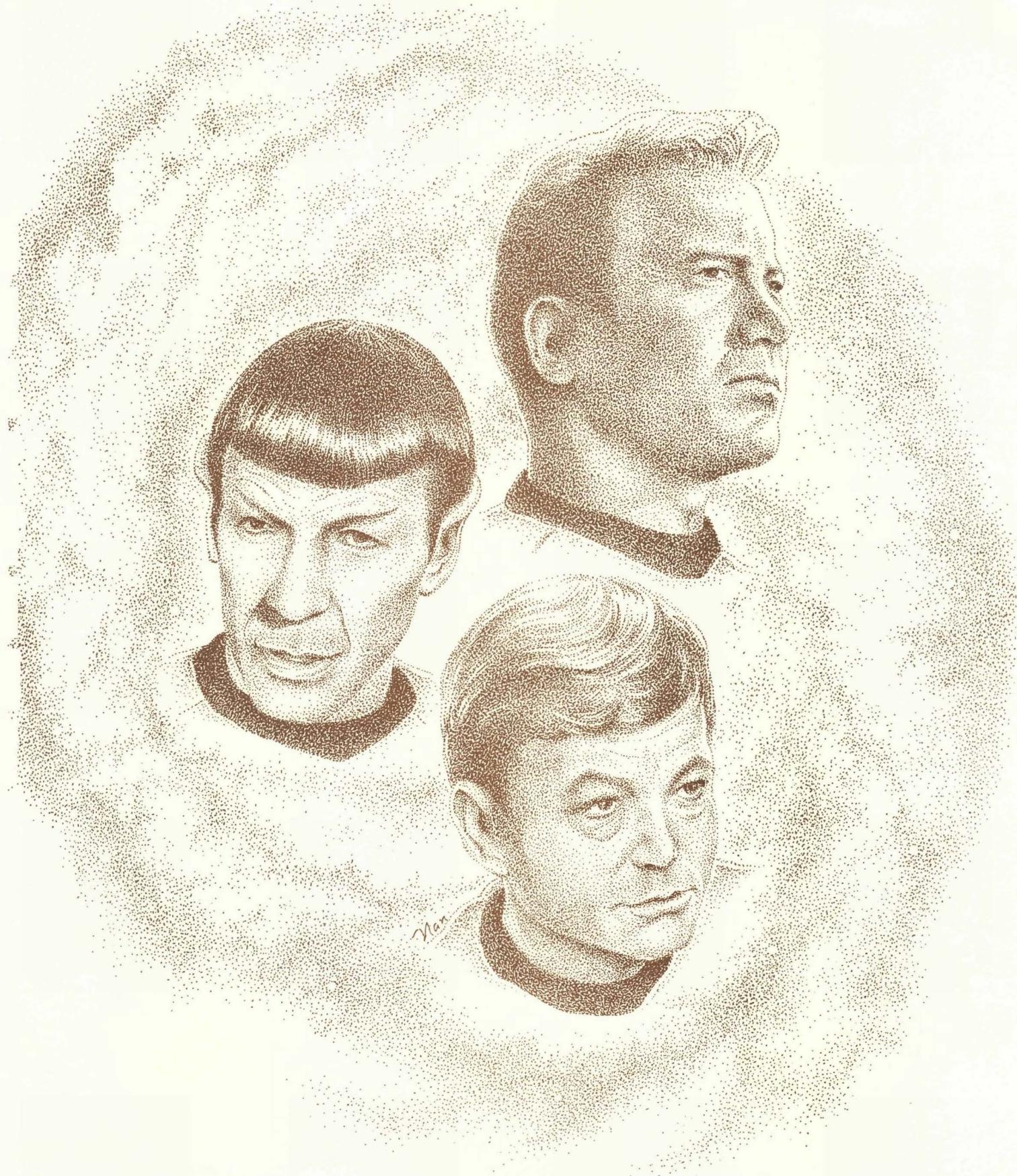
Enterprise Art Gallery



contributors

1. Gina Godwin
2. Fiona Graves
3. Jean Kluge: *Foray Into the Twilight Zone (or I Think the Man in the Hat Did Something Terrible)*
4. Pat Cash
5. Mary Stacy-MacDonald: *The Stars of Home*
6. Caren Parnes: *Caught in the Act*
7. Merle Decker
8. Christine Myers
9. Connie Faddis: *Earth, Water, Fire and Air*
10. Cami Forsell
11. Nan Lewis: *The Heart of our Galaxy*
12. Suzan Lovett: *Menagerie*
13. TACS: *Ye Olde Time Photo Sessions*

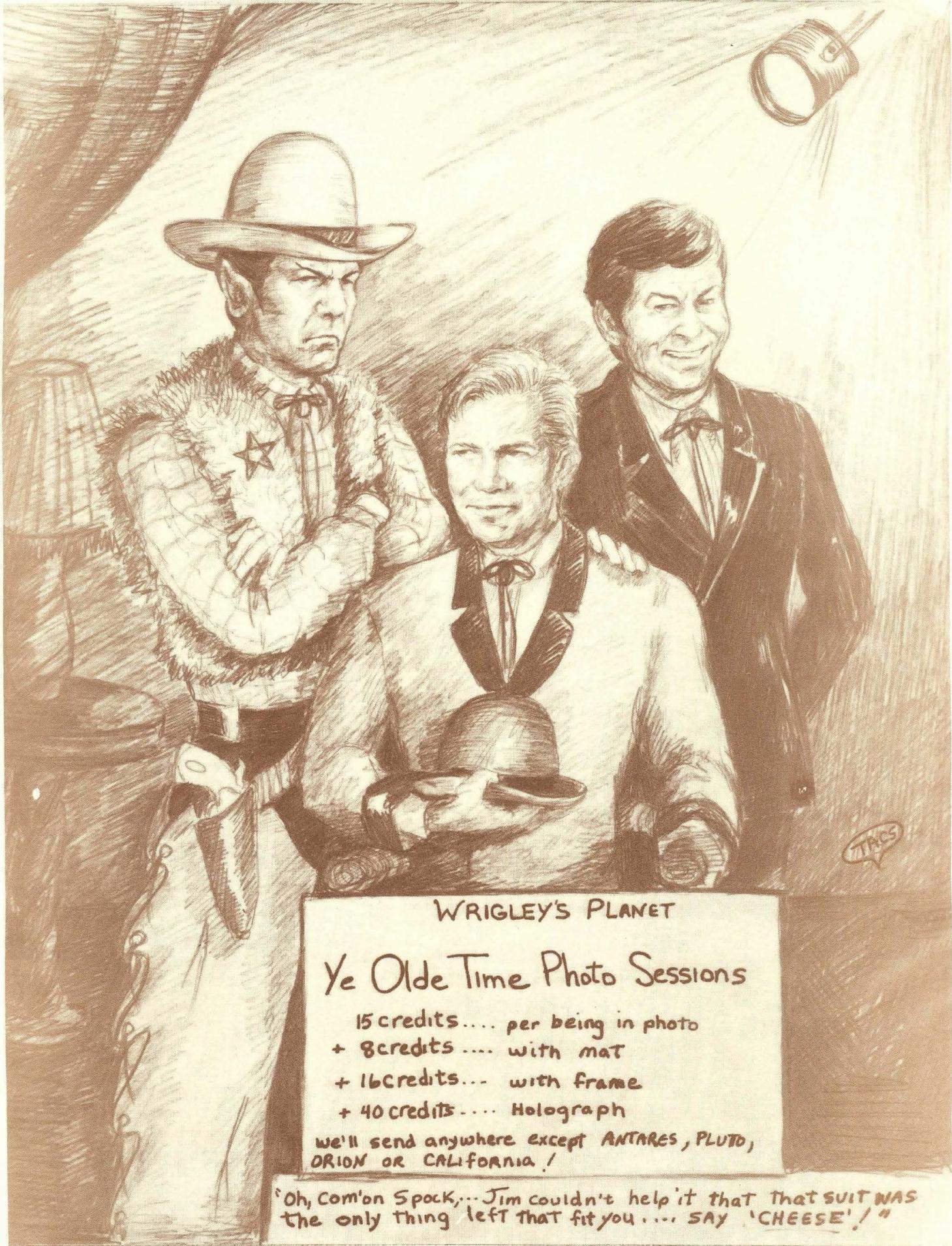




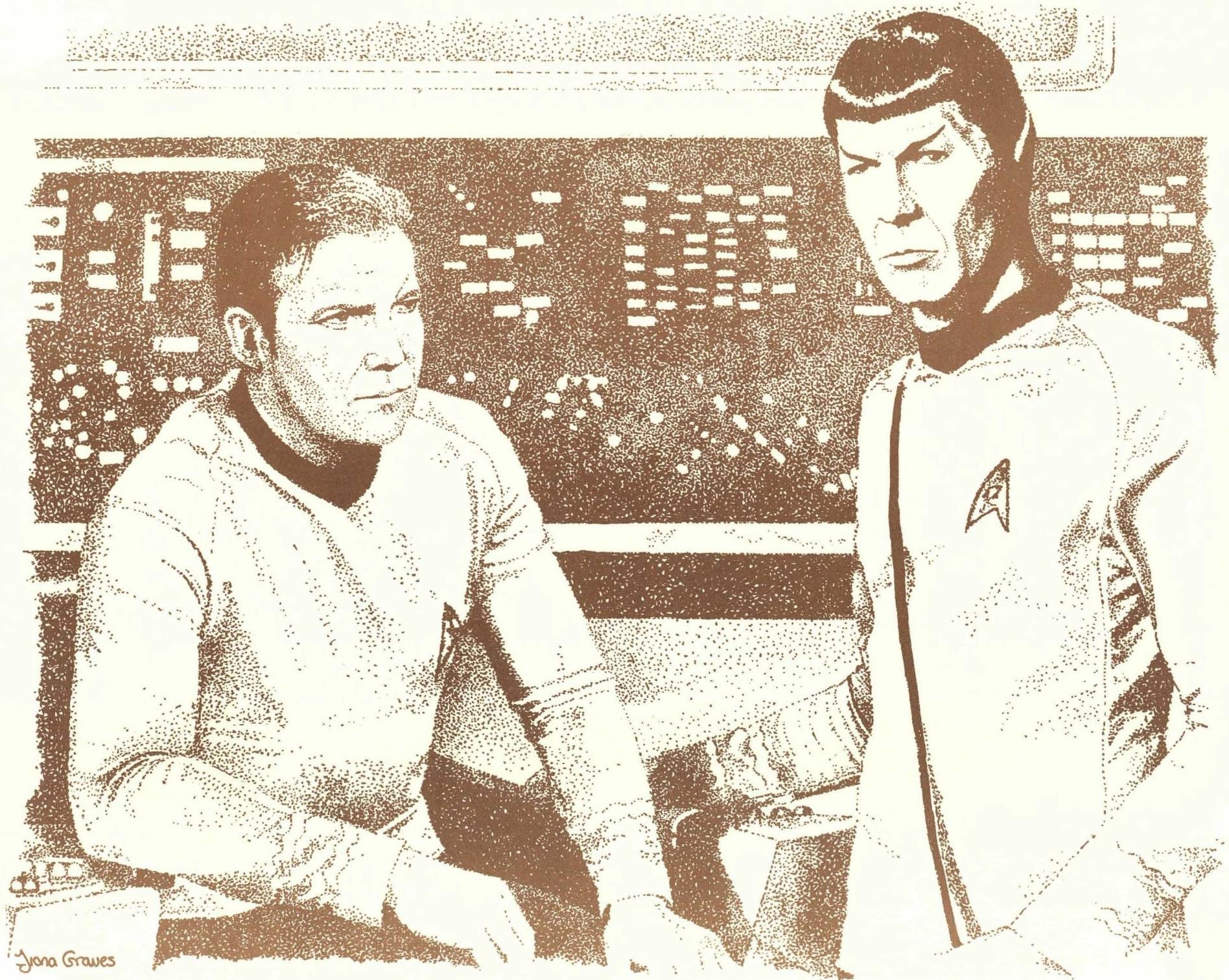
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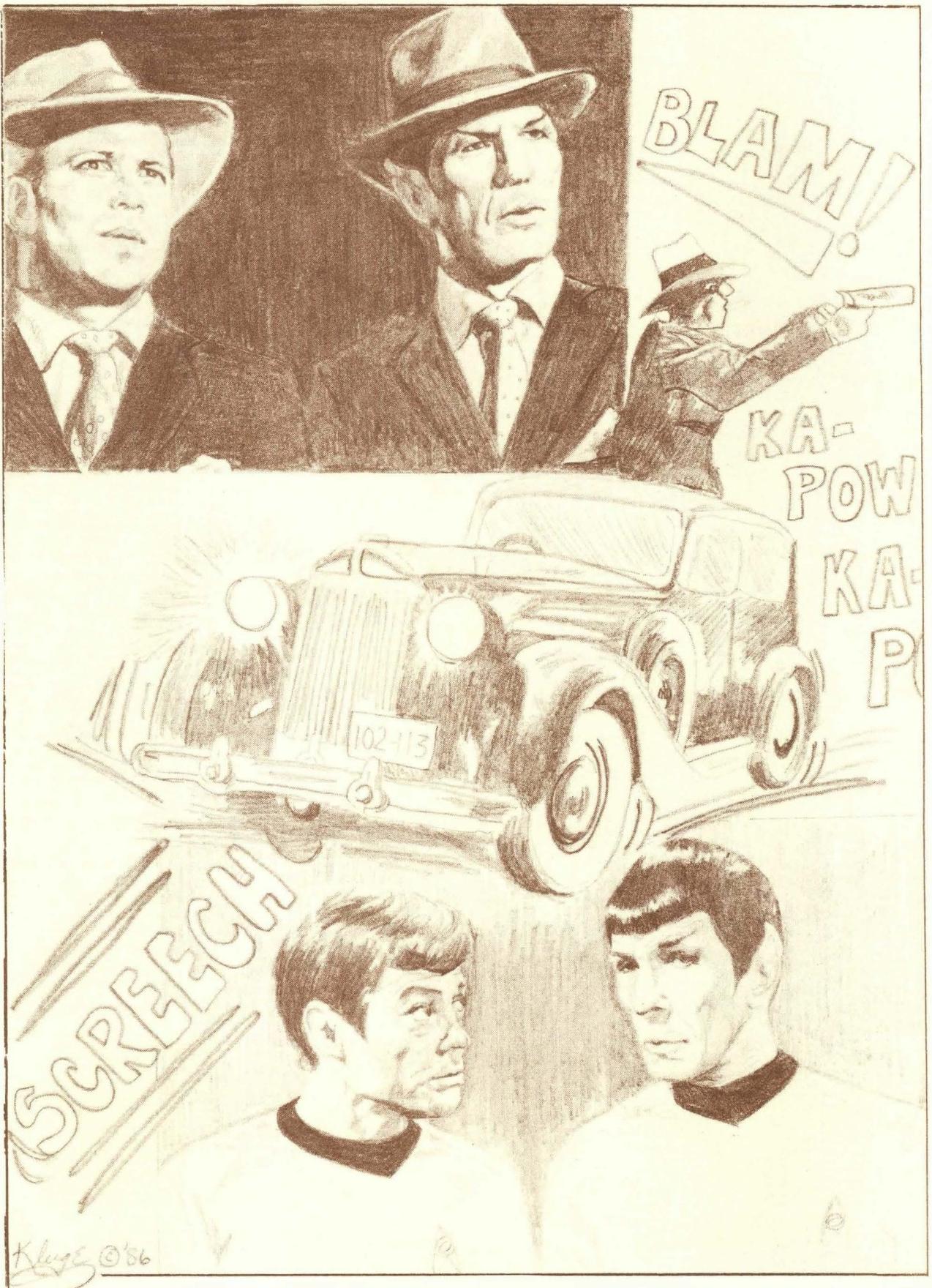
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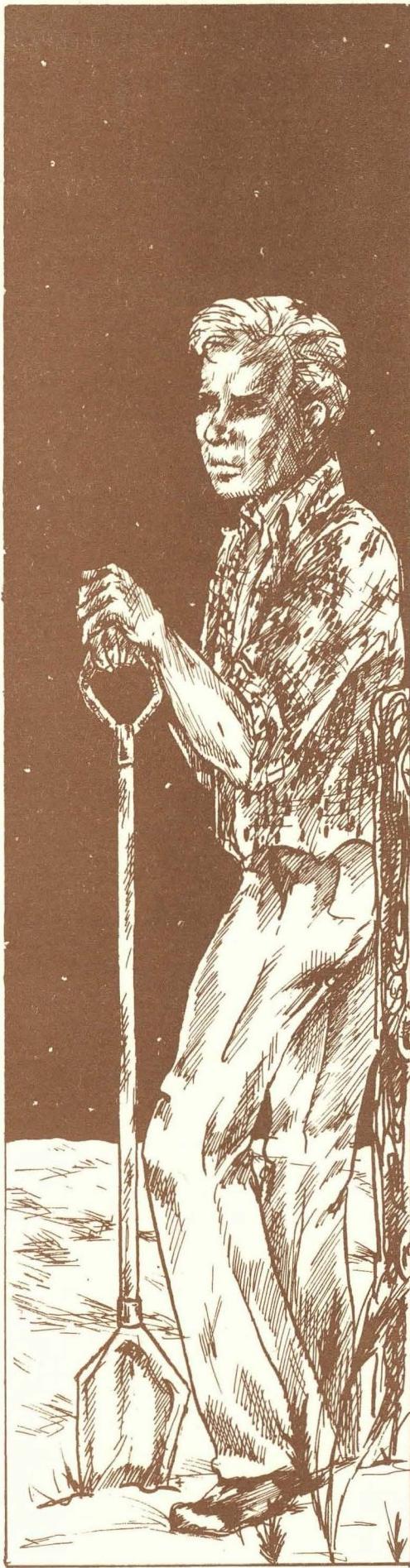
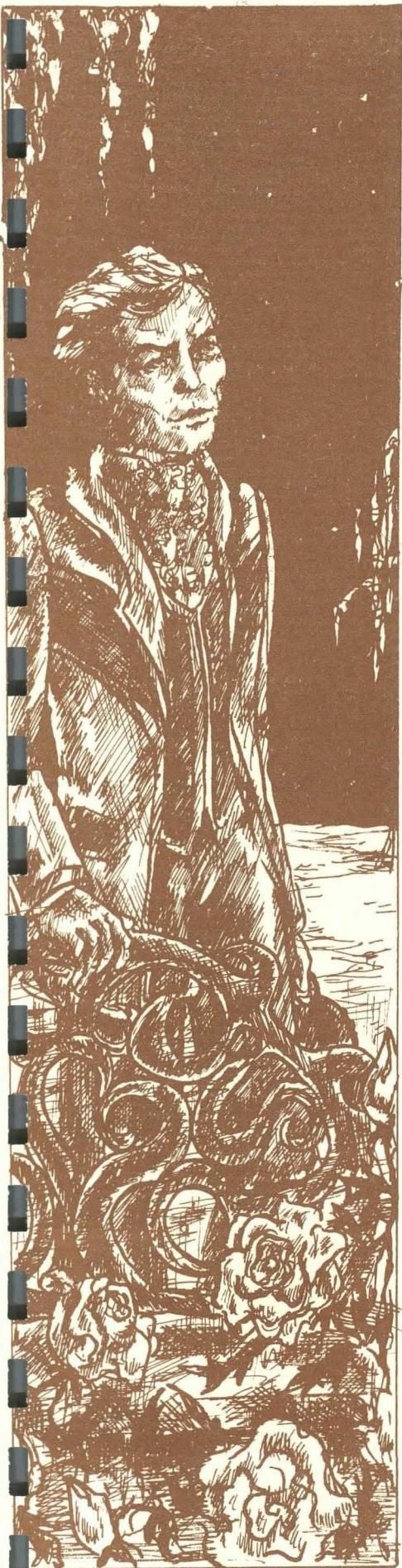


Jona Graves





Kirk
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Cmeyer

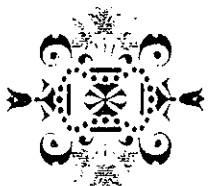


Todd 86



Circles within Circles

By: Lynn Syck & Laurel Ridener



Art: Fiona Graves



Kirk was drowning in the sounds. They reverberated inside his head and echoed over and over until the sound became his entire world -- his entire universe. Each repetition was like a knife wound to his heart. The squeal of brakes, the screech of rubber on pavement, the dull thud of heavy metal impacting with a fragile human body, then McCoy's whispered accusation, "Jim! Do you know what you did?"

Yes! he wanted to scream, I know what I did! I allowed the one woman I ever really loved to die under those screeching tires.

He couldn't even whisper her name. Did she feel pain, he wondered, in that instant before oblivion claimed her? Surprise, terror... betrayal?

He had tried not to think of it before now, had allowed events to carry him along beyond thought or memory.

But there had come a time when he could no longer keep the memories at bay. They surfaced first as dreams -- nightmares, really -- then insomnia. He wasn't certain which was worse.

And there were other things. He found he could not look at either Spock or McCoy without remembering that day, and what their lives and his own had cost.

His bitterness had surprised him. As unreasonable as it was, he found he could not control it. He kept reminding himself that there had been a lot more at stake than just their own three lives -- millions of lives, as yet unborn for Edith, dead and buried for them.

However at three o'clock in the morning, he was lying alone in a cold and empty bed, with nothing but the condemning silence to keep him company and the cherished memories of love to keep him warm. In the privacy of his own soul, he had asked... what if?

When the Enterprise had put in at Star Base 7 for routine maintenance, Kirk had put in for leave. The primary shields needed a little work anyway, and it was a good opportunity for all involved to get in a little R&R; Spock and McCoy were relieved to see Kirk taking an interest in something and offered to accompany him. They had seemed to understand, however, when he chose to be alone and had respected his wishes.

He selected a small cabin by a deep blue lake. It was high in the mountains and very secluded; there wasn't much chance he would run into other vacationers, which was exactly what he wanted.

The first few days he spent hiking the treacherous mountain trails -- the very act of staying on his feet and out of some rocky ravine drawing every last shred of his concentration. When one mountain trail became too familiar, agonizing thoughts would creep in on his consciousness. He would then choose a different path, perhaps one even more dangerous, walking for hours until he could return to the cabin and fall into a deep, exhausted and restful sleep.

The fifth day it rained. Sheets of gray pounded down from leaden skies, forcing him to stay inside. He busied himself straightening up, lighting the fire, fixing a meal. He even tackled one of the books he had brought along. Anything to keep from thinking... and remembering.

Finally the storm was over and the sun appeared. Grateful for the reprieve, Kirk donned a light jacket and strode outside.

The air was fresh and crisp with the new-washed smell of wet earth. Water dripped from trees and bushes like small diamonds catching the sunlight. As Kirk splashed through the puddles in the path to the lake, he thought of how angry his mother used to get when he came home from school covered with mud.

He could hear her say, "Honestly, James Kirk, you must have waded through every mud puddle between school and home." Her face would be stern but her brown eyes would sparkle with love. Just like...

Stop it! He commanded himself. But it did no good. His mother's dancing, laughing eyes became Edith's and grief washed over him with all the violence of a bursting dam, leaving him trembling in the newly cleansed air.

Edith's death must be dealt with. Now.

He stumbled further down the path to the edge of the lake and sat on a large boulder, contemplating the water. He must face his loss, he realized, as surely as he must face the agonized man staring back at him from the gently rippling surface. He allowed all that he had lost to fill his mind, his heart.

"Edith," Kirk whispered the name aloud for the first time. The memory of her smile, her laugh, the feel of her in his arms... their time together had been so brief. However, it was the promise of all that could have been that was such an unbearable loss.

A sudden chill wind swept in, blowing across his neck. He shivered a deep inner shiver that had nothing to do with the weather. Someone walking on his grave, his mother would have said. Maybe it was truer than she would have thought. Death felt very close right now, comfortable, familiar, and had since...

Kirk's thoughts were interrupted by a low rumbling sound. He looked up and wondered if the earlier storm was returning. The sky over the lake was darkening -- the sun almost completely hidden behind churning, murky clouds. Even as he watched, the wind blew harder, whipping the treetops against one another. For some reason, he gloried in the turmoil, turning his face into the howling wind. The fury of the storm

matched his own and he wanted to shout his anger and his hurt to the gods. And now he knew that he was indeed furious at losing Edith -- outraged at the universe for daring to live while Edith had to die. Was it worth it? he wanted to scream, well was it?

But beneath the blinding anger lay an even more demanding emotion, suddenly easily understood -- fear. Fear that went far beyond simple terror. Terror was for running and fighting. Fear was for thinking.

And he was frightened. Frightened for those other lives so dear to him. Lives that he had callously turned away from and rejected. How could he have been so stupid? Had he really wanted to hurt them as much as he was hurting? They had offered nothing but comfort and understanding and he had offered nothing but coldness and withdrawal.

Large drops of bitterly cold rain came with the wind now, lashing his face until his cheeks felt like stinging welts of icy pain. He hardly noticed, however. Kirk felt he was at last realizing the truth of what his real grief had been and he wanted to follow it through; he was so close, he couldn't stop now -- he had to understand, had to face that truth before he could accept absolution.

The sky was black and the wind whipped the lake into a whitecapped frenzy. The rain fell harder and shafts of yellow lightning slashed through the gloom, followed almost instantaneously by earth-shaking, ear-shattering thunder.

Kirk realized he had been caught in the killing savageness of a mountain storm, and began to run for the cabin.

The wind became a roar of noise and he could hear the trees moaning against each other, snapping like twigs before the storm's might. Kirk could feel the wind push and pull at him as the cold rain was driven into his eyes until he could no longer see the path. The wind became part of him, blowing harder and harder still until suddenly there was no up or down or forward. He lost all sense of direction. Reality was a myth. Fact became fantasy as he was pitched and thrown into a roaring, inky nothingness.



The alternative to the nothingness was pain -- all-consuming and unending. Kirk could not force his mind to focus on anything beyond the pain. It seemed there were voices that came and went and hands that tried to be gentle, but which only caused more pain. McCoy's hands? He wondered briefly before the pain returned to claim all his attention.

There were periods when the nothingness dominated him again and he surrendered to it gladly.

Finally, there came a time when he opened his eyes to find nothing familiar. He was not in the Enterprise sickbay -- that much was certain. The room was small, furnished with just the bed he lay in. The walls and ceiling were an unrelenting white that was almost a glare.

There were no sounds, no sign of any one other than himself. Odd pieces of dusty equipment were strewn haphazardly around the room.



Diana Graves

Kirk tried to move but sitting -- much less standing -- was a physical impossibility. He was able to turn his head just enough to glance over his shoulder. There was no diagnostic panel.

A ragged blanket covered him from chest to toe, tucked in with mummylike thoroughness. Panic set in when he tried to move and wasn't able to. But then, over his shoulder and out of the corner of his eye, he saw a portable traction field generator functioning well enough to keep him immobile. He stopped fighting the sense of claustrophobia and began to take stock of what surroundings he could see from his limited position.

Kirk lay in the silence trying to piece together what had happened. He remembered the storm and a feeling of being picked up and thrown about by the force of the wind. From the way his entire body felt, it must have been a pretty hard landing. By all rights, then, he should be in the Base hospital -- or at least in the Enterprise's sickbay.

But this was nothing he had ever seen at the Base. Before he could speculate further, the door opened and a young man entered carrying a small tray. He was dressed in a wrinkled white smock and baggy pants stained at the knees.

Kirk regarded him closely but said nothing until he laid the tray on the foot of the bed and approached him, hypo in hand. "What's that?" Kirk managed.

The young man smiled slightly. "Just something for the pain." He administered it before his reluctant patient had a chance to object.

Kirk felt the pain begin to back off a little, allowing his mind to clear.

"Better?"

Kirk nodded. "Where am I?"

"Prison hospital ward."

"Prison? What prison?" He was totally stunned at the unexpected answer.

"RKA." At Kirk's blank stare, he continued. "Yeah, I forgot you wouldn't have any way of knowing. RKA is the Romulan/Klingon Alliance."

"Rom... I don't..." The words wouldn't come. The enormity of what he had just heard hit him with the force of a phaser stun.

"What happened," he finally demanded.

"Two weeks ago they attacked this star base. I was a civilian med-tech at the base hospital. Off-duty at the time of the attack, lucky me."

Kirk swallowed hard. This couldn't be happening. "Wait," he asked. "You said two weeks?" I've been out for two weeks?"

The tech nodded his blonde head. "Yeah. We didn't think you were going to make it. Actually, if the RKA soldiers had had their way, you wouldn't have." At Kirk's puzzled frown, he explained. "The Klingons don't take wounded prisoners. So the doctor

sort of hid you away here. Used to be somebody's office, then a therapy room. We're in the old complex. Most of the new part was destroyed in the attack."

The Enterprise, my God... Kirk's head was pounding wildly. Fear for his ship coursed through him. The Enterprise had been in orbit over the star base undergoing routine maintenance. Had Spock been able to get his ship away? How many of his crew had been trapped on the base? How many killed?

The young man spoke again. "By the way, my name's Gavin. What's yours?"

Kirk suddenly became very still. "Why?"

"Well, you didn't have any ID on you when they brought you in."

That explained why he was still alive. He couldn't afford to be turned over to the RKA. If they ever found out who and what he was, he would be killed outright or at least subjected to the mindsifter. On leave at a remote location, out of uniform without even so much as a credit in his jeans, his rescuers had obviously taken him for just another local civilian. He had to keep it that way until he could determine how to get back to his ship.

"My name's Jim."

"Just Jim?" Gavin asked.

"For now."

Gavin nodded, a sparkle of comraderie in his eyes. "There's been a lot of that going 'round lately. Jim it is."

"How long before I can get out of here? Kirk asked, the word 'prison' echoing in his mind. "Or don't I get out?"

Gavin shrugged. "You'll get out of here but not out of this prison. People die when they even suggest it. How long? I'm no doctor, but I'd say it'll be quite a while. You nearly didn't make it. Almost every bone broken, skull fracture, internal injuries, your back was pretty messed up... do you want me to keep going?"

Kirk mouthed a silent 'no'.

"So," the young tech finished, smiling, "Doc's got you immobilized to keep you from damaging your spine. You won't be doing much of anything for a while." His face sobered. "Besides, there is no place to go. We're all prisoners here. The RKA holds the base."

When the patient did not respond, Gavin picked up his tray and turned to leave.

"I'll be back later with some food and the doctor will stop by when he can."

Kirk felt a great weariness come over him but he had to know everything.

"What about the other star bases, the Federation... their ships?"

Gavin started, looking quickly over his shoulder. He lowered his voice. "Ya gotta watch what ya say. They have ways... The RKA is winning."

"I don't believe it," Kirk whispered.

"Yeah, well, neither did I. Some new prisoners spread the word, though -- we're getting our ass kicked but good."

The door closed, leaving Kirk alone, his mind a turmoil of questions without answers.

How could this have happened so quickly? Such an alliance had always been a frightening possibility but no recent intelligence had even hinted at such a thing. But with Romulan brilliance combined with Klingon treachery... anything was possible. Where was the Enterprise? Where in the bloody hell was anybody? He clenched his hands into angry fists at his sides. Damn! Somehow he had to get out of here and back to his ship.

Long hours passed until, at last, he fell into a light sleep. Gavin returned with his dinner, meager though it was. He fed it to Kirk, one bite at a time, with an easy long-practiced patience. Kirk, still immobilized and helpless, appreciated the silent, unquestioning assistance.

An elderly gray haired doctor arrived shortly after Gavin left.

"Well, I'm glad to see you're looking so much better." Kirk wondered if all doctors took a course in Bedside Manners 101. They all seemed to say the same thing in the same way.

"I'm Doctor Minelli. And you are... ?"

Again something in Kirk would not let him reveal his identity, some unnamed feeling of self-preservation. That undocumented but very reliable command instinct of his.

"My name's Jim," he answered in that tone that discouraged any further questions.

"Yes, well... let's just see how you're doing, Jim."

A few minutes later, the doctor announced himself pleased with Kirk's rate of recovery. "I think by tomorrow we can reduce the traction field and let you try sitting up a few moments. Not too much too soon, though."

The doctor stood and prepared to leave. He glanced around the room and back to his patient. "Kind of boring with nothing to look at but a lot of old trash, isn't it?" He paused as Kirk nodded. "This used to be quite a lovely office. I chose the colors myself. Soft pastels, a mural on that far wall... After they built the new wing, I was moved into one of the new 'modern' offices, and this was used as a physical therapy room. There must be an unwritten law somewhere that dictates all therapy rooms have to be painted one color... white."

The doctor got down on his hands and knees and reached far beneath the bed for a small brown box. He stood up slowly, brushed the dust off the top and handed it to

Kirk. It was a small control box. He winked. "A little secret, just between us?" Again Kirk nodded. "The top button will open a window on the far wall. Everybody thought the big mirror was a part of the therapy room and I didn't think it my place to correct them. It's one-way glass so don't worry about the RKA. There's a garden..." A wistful smile played across the weary face.

"This was my office many years ago, before the new complex," he repeated, his mind wandering. "I planted the garden, tended each tree and plant with my own hands..."

Kirk looked away from the saddened face and studied the mechanism, not sure what to say.

The doctor's voice reached him. "So many hurt... dying. And I'm all they have. All the other doctors were killed or taken away by the RKA."

Kirk looked up sharply. "You're the only doctor?"

"Yes. I assume they left me here because they thought me too old to be of any real use. Possibly they were right."

Kirk reached out his hand and grasped the man's arm. "Since obviously I owe you my life, Doctor, I would have to disagree."

The elderly man, so much like his own Bones in so many ways, cleared his throat and headed for the door. "Yes, well... I must get back to my other patients." He hesitated and lowered his voice. "Just a word of caution, young man... this is supposed to be an empty portion of the hospital and any sudden increase in power usage might create a lot of unwanted curiosity... don't keep the window open too long at a time?"

Kirk nodded as the doctor left, and then turned his attention to the controls and pressed the top button. On the far wall, a panel faded from mirror to scenic wonder as the doctor's garden was revealed to him.

It was a formal lawn in miniature, bordered by hedges and flowers and decorated with marble pillars and statuary scattered about. The sun was setting and it cast a rosy glow upon the various forms, seeming to give them an appearance of life.

As darkness spread, Kirk closed the window. Somehow he could not bear to see an end to anything else.



Kirk's second day of consciousness was spent staring at blank walls, worrying and thinking. Thoughts and emotions he had found impossible to confront while at the cabin could now be analyzed and understood. His bitterness, his anger -- especially his blind, unreasonable anger -- at those he loved most were now seen and understood for the complex reactions that they were. He made a silent vow that should he get out of this alive and see them again, he would tell them how much he cared for and needed them, no matter how corny and trite it might sound. Sometimes it was the old and simple words that said the most. He only prayed they would still be alive to hear him.

He picked up the control box and once again activated the two-way mirror. The garden was every bit as lovely as he remembered; more so perhaps because of a heart

made a little lighter. He reveled in the luxurious colors of the garden, so much a contrast to the barren white of his room. He bathed vicariously in the warm dancing sunlight and partook of the tranquility of the garden like the starving man that he was.

Kirk remembered the doctor's warning and closed the mirror. The walls did not seem so cold and barren -- he could accept the room just by knowing what lay on the other side of the glaring white wall.



Even with the steady infusion of painkillers and sedatives, the night had been furiously long for the traction-bound Captain. Sleep had stayed as elusive as a virgin at Spring Festival. By the time morning actually arrived, Kirk was looking forward to Gavin's visit with an almost maniacal expectancy.

The morning passed with an agonizing slowness, and then it was noon. Still Gavin had not appeared. Kirk's curiosity -- then mounting irritation had turned to frightened concern. He felt he had developed a rapport with the brash young man. He would not have been delayed unless something critical had happened.

The afternoon waned, hunger pangs gnawed at his belly. Kirk was tempted to use the window to pass the time, but with Gavin's unexpected absence, and the doctor's warning about power surges, he had no desire to tempt fate.

On the heels of that thought, Gavin appeared, dinner tray in hand. One eye was swollen shut, his lips bruised and puffy and the rest of his body bore the marks of a severe beating. One hand was meticulously wrapped in a fresh bandage and, without being sure why, Kirk had the impression a finger was missing.

Gavin balanced on one foot and shoved an old crate up against the bed with the other, holding the tray awkwardly in his one good hand. "Sorry I'm late," he said through thickened lips. "I got detained along the way."

Kirk looked away self-consciously and toyed with the blanket before looking back up at Gavin. He hated to ask any embarrassing questions, but there was no ignoring the obvious. "Um... what happened?" he asked.

Gavin tried to smile, cracked a lower lip which caused it to start bleeding again. He wiped at it with the bandaged hand. "Well, I was never much of a diplomat. One of the guards was bragging about what they had done to one of the nurses. I'm not sure he understood the term, but he didn't seem to like it when I called him a dirty son-of-a-bitch. He didn't want to waste time being neat about it."

Gavin moved closer to Kirk to help feed him his dinner. As he positioned the tray with his injured hand, he accidentally spilled part of the hot coffee on Kirk's hand.

"Dammit Gavin!" Kirk swore, trying to jerk his hand back. Because of the traction field, none of his movements were that fast and most of the spilled coffee landed on his bare hand.

"Oh God I'm sorry, Jim... I didn't mean to, honest," Gavin raced on. He picked up a rumpled towel and began gently dabbing the coffee. "Let me get that," he offered, his touch lingering a little longer than was necessary.

Kirk had been staring at his burned hand, but then his gaze shifted to Gavin's eyes. They were darkly intent and spoke volumes. "I really am sorry, Jim," Gavin mumbled, "clumsy..." "

Kirk looked back down at the tray. As Gavin wiped the spilled coffee away with the bandaged hand, the forefinger of the other hand had traced three letters in the beaded coffee still puddled on the tray. "ESC" the three letters cried. Kirk's breath caught in his throat.

Gavin still chattered his apologies while he quickly wiped the rest of the spilled coffee from the tray, forever obliterating the three letters.

He carefully folded up the old towel and set it next to the empty cup. "You know, we're going to have to do something about you. We can't hide you here forever. If the Klingons find you, they'll ship you out to a slave camp. If you want to help..." at that point his finger tapped the tray three times where the letters had been -- "if you want to help, we can slip you in on the maintenance crew. I imagine we all look alike to these bloody Klingon bastards, and I doubt they'd notice one more human face around here. Besides, they're short-handed as it is and they can't go around shipping out all the slaves and expect to run the base well enough to defend it."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, they need their soldiers and officers to defend the base. They need us to clean up after them."

At that, he began feeding Kirk his dinner.

Kirk was not thinking about what Gavin had said as much what the young man had traced out in the spilled coffee. ESC -- those letters could stand for only one thing. Earlier, he had said escape was impossible. Was that true, or had that been for the benefit of anyone who happened to overhear? But as Spock was fond of saying, there are always possibilities, alternatives.

At that, his heart seemed to stop, and his breath caught in his throat. Would he ever see Spock and McCoy again? Would he ever again walk the softly vibrating decks of his ship? Memories welled up and he fought back stinging tears.

He looked up and caught Gavin staring at him. He cleared his throat awkwardly. "I guess my back hurts a little," he said.

Gavin nodded. "I understand. I also understand that one way or another, the pain will go away before too much longer."

Kirk nodded away the last bite of dinner. With that, Gavin picked up the tray and walked away. "Sorry again about spilling the coffee," he muttered over his shoulder. "Hope it doesn't hurt too much," and both of them knew it wasn't the coffee Gavin was talking about.

Kirk hesitated over the critical question. Gavin was almost at the door, and if he didn't ask now, it would be another long night in the unending hell of not-knowing. "Gavin?" Kirk called after him.

Gavin turned, waiting.

"Any more news?" Kirk dared.

"Nope," he said, starting to leave. He changed his mind and turned back. "Ya, there was one bit of skuttle, heard it while Doc Minelli was fixing my hand. I guess the ship that was in orbit around the base was attacked and destroyed. We thought she had got away..." Kirk wanted to scream at Gavin, stop, I don't want to hear any more! But Gavin continued, oblivious to Kirk's agony, "her screens were under repair and they just sliced her up."

The Captain's throat was one agonized constriction and he found it impossible to speak.

Gavin could see how much the news disturbed the wounded man. "Hey, I'm sorry" he offered, misinterpreting Kirk's reaction. "I wish I could tell you we were winning, but..."

Kirk nodded, biting the inside of his cheek until he could taste blood.

Gavin left the room as silently as he had entered, leaving Kirk alone with his savage thoughts.

The afternoon stretched on, Kirk at last used the control box. Something about the setting sun gently eased the pain, bringing a small sense of peace to his tattered soul. He cried, long and hard, deep inside where it didn't show.

As he watched the muted colors play over the array of flowers, he let his mind empty of the bitter dark thoughts until there was nothing left.

What was done was done and could not be changed, no matter how much he wanted it. The time for self-recrimination and guilt was passed. Grief, too, must be set aside. He had to have a clear head and a willing heart if he was going to be of any help to Gavin.

But most of all he had to be on his feet. As long as he lay here hating and brooding, channeling vital life forces into negative emotions, there wasn't going to be a hell of a lot of healing getting done. He would somehow get out of this damned place, and he would somehow get back to the Federation or whatever was left of it.

He would find Spock and McCoy. He was bound and determined, as surely as the shadows followed the sun, that he would find his way back. And if the Enterprise wasn't there, there would be another ship; and if Spock and McCoy -- no, he wasn't even going to let that thought take shape in his mind, he had enough to contend with as it was.

He shut off the window and settled back into his bed wishing now he had learned more about the healing trance Spock had often told him about.

He worked at his own healing trance. He forced his body to relax, refused to allow any further negative thoughts to intrude into his mind, and set about the business of healing his own battered body.



On the morning of the fourth day Gavin used the traction control to lessen the field. He helped his patient sit up on the side of the bed. Kirk gasped at the pain even such a small movement brought.

"Okay, that's enough for now." Gavin helped him lay back down. "Doc Minelli would kill me if I let his star patient overdo."

Kirk took several deep breaths, letting the traction field support him completely until the throbbing in his back subsided. "Have you heard any more news? About that starship? Kirk kept his voice carefully level and hoped the sheer terror he was feeling did not show through. Gossip has an uncanny knack for being totally erroneous and some small part of his mind just wouldn't accept that the Enterprise could be destroyed.

Gavin shook his head. "Just what I told you when you asked yesterday. Be back in a minute with your breakfast."

Alone again, Kirk's mind ranged over his options. He had to get back on his feet, obviously, and then find a way out and back to whatever remained of his life.

However, depression settled around him, binding him more surely than the traction field. His body felt as if it weighed a thousand pounds. He did not want to move, most of all he didn't want to think.

Yet that wasn't his style, and thinking was what he did best. He saw the traction control box lying on the table and picked it up. The doctor and Gavin were moving much too slowly.

He released the traction field and, as an afterthought, activated the window. Initiative, he sighed, a goal -- to see the sunlight dancing on the statuary, to watch the shadows lengthen and gracefully span the lawns...

He felt his heart stop beating. The once lovely and serene garden had now become Gol'gotha.

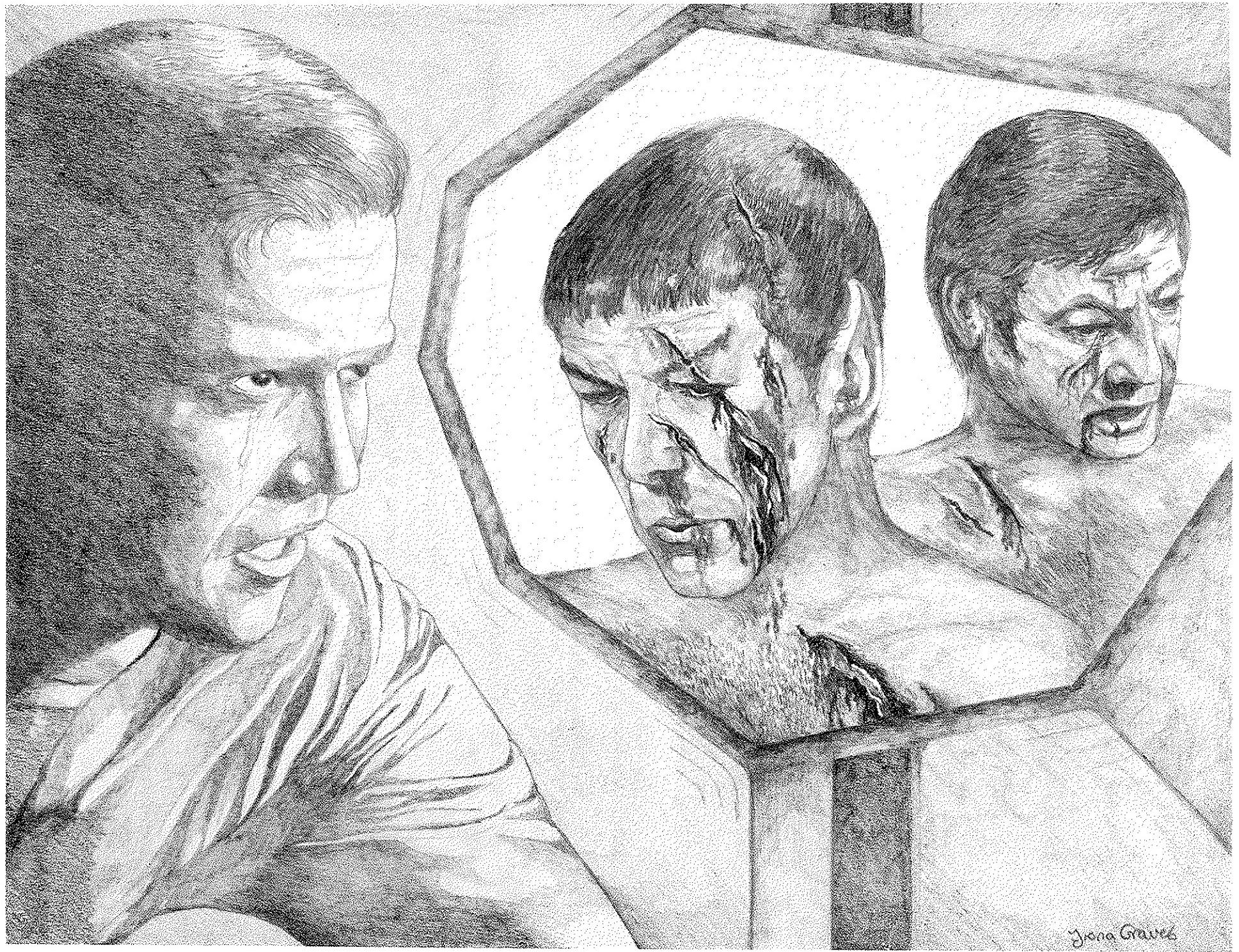
Bound to the white marble pillars were McCoy and Spock.

It was true then: his ship was lost, his crew captured or killed. Agony unlike any he had ever felt grew inside him and he felt his body grow cold. Trembling hands laid the control aside... forgotten.

Kirk's eyes never left the still figures bathed in the red light of the newly risen sun. He struggled to sit upright, then stand. Cold sweat broke out on his face as jabbing blades of white hot pain cut through him, radiating from his back, down his legs and arms, setting his fingertips afire.

Each step was hell and he wondered how he could take the next. Kirk held onto the bed until he reached the end. The space between the foot of the bed and the window seemed ten parsecs wide. He forced himself to look up at them. Both faces showed cuts and bruises -- had his friends put up a fight or had they been hurt when the ship was taken?

They seemed to be talking to each other -- McCoy even managed a weak smile. It faded quickly when several other figures moved into Kirk's line of sight. Klingons armed with stun whips and disruptors.



Jenna Graves

They started with McCoy, cutting deep gashes in his arms, chest and face. Cuts that bled little because of the searing charge of power that followed the cut.

Kirk's fist clenched helplessly at his sides. "Bones..." he whispered and took yet another tortured step forward.

McCoy hung limply from his bonds, unconscious Kirk prayed.

Spock was next. When he gave them no reaction, no satisfaction, they were twice as brutal. At last the tormentors stopped when Spock's face was no longer recognizable and his flesh hung in ribbons from his chest.

"No, please... Spock..." Another step on legs that were limbs of fire.

He felt nausea rise in his throat but, somehow, it had become his whole life to reach that window. Kirk could not help them, could not even help himself but he had to be as close to his friends as possible.

The Klingons laughed and joked among themselves. Kirk knew anger such as he had never felt before.

Another step... Another. Spock's eyes opened and he seemed to look directly at Kirk for an instant. Kirk's heart slammed in his chest.

The Klingons stood in a semi-circle in front of their two prisoners and Kirk watched in horror as they drew their disruptors and aimed them.

McCoy was conscious now and he turned his head to say something to Spock. The Vulcan replied and then, with great effort, both officers pulled themselves up straighter, and faced their executioners with no fear.

Kirk felt his heart break first with pride and love; and then with the horrible agony of loss.

Another step. The Klingons began to fire; but it was not to be a clean kill. They wanted their prisoners to die by inches. Each wound was Kirk's; arms, legs, chests. The bodies jerked. McCoy's mouth formed screams Kirk could not hear, but would hear, until his dying day.

Another step. He watched the leader take careful aim at McCoy, watched the disruptor fire but closed his eyes at that final horror.

When he opened them, McCoy's body sagged against the pillar, now red with blood.

"Bones..." Another step.

The disruptor flashed again in the morning sun and Spock's body jerked convulsively and was still. The ground was slick with blood, Vulcan green mixing forever with human red.

Kirk was finally at the window and he pressed his face against its coolness. Great wrenching sobs were torn from him, hot tears burned his face. He wanted to die with them and he wanted to live to avenge them.

He was vaguely aware of the door opening behind him. There was a sharp gasp and Kirk turned to see Gavin taking in the grizzly sight framed in the traitorous window.

"Jim?" He started forward slowly but stopped at Kirk's raised hand.

The man he had known as Jim seemed to change before his eyes. Kirk pulled his tortured body erect, shoulders back, head lifted proudly.

The face was deathly white and streaked with tears, but the voice was firm and full of pride.

"No... Kirk. Captain James T. Kirk, of the USS Enterprise."

Then the world fell on him. He felt its crushing weight, felt himself falling into an abyss of pain and grief, fury and hate, into a darkness everlasting and unending...



Pain. Total, intense, all-encompassing pain. Each cell, each molecule throbbed with the pain until the not-quite-sane thought formed that surely he must be in hell.

Whispered voices filtered through the pain, coming and going, but the last vestiges of his sanity refused to care. There was just one reality, and it consisted of two mangled, tortured bodies, two friends alive only in his memories. Kirk had taken it as his right and responsibility to keep them alive in the one way he knew how -- in his mind and his heart -- and he would not be robbed of that privilege.

But the physical pain diminished and the red haze in which he existed slowly faded into the numbing darkness of his chosen escape.

He could not keep the voices out any longer. They intruded into his darkness and his memories, demanding his attention. He tried to open his eyes but could not remember how.

He lay there, wrapped in the cocoon of semi-awareness, letting the voices mingle and twine with his own thoughts but still refusing to hear them.

They were not real anyway, just bits and pieces of dreams -- why should he listen to shadows and illusions and the cry of halfborn dreams?

He could resist no longer. That tiny spark, that one single bit of energy that was the essence of James T. Kirk would not permit the lethargy to continue. He opened his eyes, squinting at the glare of light. A figure leaned over him.

"Gavin?" Kirk asked almost inaudibly. Then his vision cleared and he saw that it was a woman dressed in a Starfleet uniform.

Starfleet?

"No, Captain. My name is Lea Wilson," she said and smiled broadly. "You rest now and I'll get the doctor."

Captain? Doctor?

Kirk closed his eyes again, trying to compose his chaotic thoughts into some kind of rational order before Minelli arrived. He heard footsteps approach the bed.

"How are you feeling, Jim-boy?"

Kirk froze. That soft, Southern drawl cut into him like a laser. It sounded like... no, he had seen him die in a way almost beyond human comprehension. It was some cruel joke of drugs and pain or...

... or he was mad.

Did the madman know he was insane? If the universe was shrinking at an incredible rate and you measured it with a ruler shrinking at the same incredible rate, would you know the universe was actually shrinking?

He opened his eyes slowly to meet the familiar blue ones. This could not be happening.

"Jim... Jim? Can you hear me? A worried voice, the soft tones brushing enticingly against his battered heart.

Visions of Klingons forced their way into his mind. This had to be one of their tricks -- the mindsifter, somehow they had discovered his greatest fears and would destroy his mind as slowly and as savagely as they had destroyed his two friends.

Kirk had seen the bloody red and green of reality. If he were to escape, to fight and win and one day return to this place to bury his dead, he must hold on to his sanity at all costs. He must not be deceived by false promises that would surely drive him mad.

He willfully slipped into unconsciousness, taking with him the memories of the garden. They could not destroy his mind if his mind was nowhere to be found... Spock had taught him that much.



McCoy watched the monitors slow and slip into the steady pulsing of the unconscious. These lapses were becoming serious. The Captain would soon reach a critical point -- a point where there wouldn't be any coming back.

"Wilson," McCoy ordered, rougher than he had intended, "get me Commander Spock. Stat!"

She didn't waste time on a reply and McCoy knew Spock would be here in moments.

What could have happened to Jim to cause reactions like this? He had been hurt before -- badly hurt before, but he had always responded to McCoy's gentle if at times unorthodox treatments. But this time...

"Lt. Wilson said you wished to see me immediately."

The unexpected soft voice behind him startled the concentrating doctor. "Dammit, Spock!" he snapped, immediately regretting the harsh tones.

The Vulcan ignored the doctor's remark, waiting, eyes drawn to the life-readings monitors. Kirk was alive, his body recovering, but still unconscious. He raised a questioning eyebrow.

"I don't know, Spock. He should be alert by now, talking, but..." McCoy shrugged helplessly. "I just don't know. It's almost as if he doesn't want to regain consciousness. Which is crazy. He was looking right at me, I know he recognized me."

McCoy stared at Spock until the Vulcan felt the entirely human urge to fidget. "And?" he demanded at last.

"A meld, maybe? If you could see what's eating at him, then we would know how to treat it. He's been in worse physical shape than this Spock, and we've always been able to reach him..."

Spock looked down at the figure on the bed, asking himself, yet again, what had happened to his Captain to drive him away like this.

He nodded once at McCoy and prepared for a light meld. There could be no permission. Perhaps, at some later point, if this attempt were successful he would ask forgiveness.

Spock placed his hand in the meld position on Kirk's face, closed his eyes and spoke the ancient words.

The familiar upper levels of Kirk's mind were easily passed through, but what he sought was not on these upper levels... he passed through more levels, each subsequent level tighter and darker and more difficult to penetrate. And still what he sought was not here. These levels of his mind were like an abandoned house whose doors and windows had been left opened and unlocked. If Kirk's will and consciousness did not return soon, other minds and thoughts would invade these upper levels and he would be truly insane and forever beyond Spock's reach.

The very thought frightened Spock; so he intensified his probe, seeking the deepest regions. At last he found a barrier -- the ultimate barrier surrounding Kirk's mind, a barrier that could be overcome only with violence and force.

Spock quickly withdrew. He shuddered as his hand slipped from Kirk's face.

McCoy waited. "Well?" he asked after nearly an eternal minute had passed.

"There is nothing I can do, Dr. McCoy. The upper levels of his mind are quite vacant. The lower levels that I could traverse were darkened by violence and horrors his mind would not reveal."

"Violence? Horrors?" McCoy repeated hoarsely. "He got hit on the head with a goddam tree! Spock, is his mind..."

"His mind is there, Doctor, but behind such a barrier that only the greatest force could penetrate it... and I will use no force with the Captain."

McCoy grabbed the Vulcan's arm. "Spock! That's Jim lying there. You have to do something! It's insanity you're talking about! You can't let that happen. Spock... please!"

Spock gently loosened McCoy's grip from his arm. "Perhaps there is one more thing I could do for the Captain."

The words, the look of intense concentration on Spock's face frightened McCoy.

"Spock, what are you going to do!" he demanded, but the Vulcan, lips moving in silent incantation, was already beyond his reach.



Spock was once more at the barrier surrounding Kirk's mind -- a fortress of violence and the darker emotions, striations of red and green throughout. He saw and somehow understood that barrier, but whatever had caused Kirk to seek refuge behind it would forever remain Kirk's secret unless Spock could somehow counteract the pain and agony.

He stood there, magician that he was, calling up a gentle warm breeze, and on this breeze he set a melody of the ancient times, a melody of the vast Vulcan deserts, a melody of brotherhood and love, courage and companionship, longing and fulfillment...



Spock slowly let his hand slip from Kirk's face. The desire to forcibly penetrate the barrier had been almost more than he could resist. To simply destroy the offending wall and bring Kirk's mind into the sunlight had been most tempting indeed. But the risk of madness that would surely follow such an attack was too great.

"Spock?" McCoy asked softly. No answer. "Spock!" he said, more insistently.

At last the Vulcan's eyes cleared. "I have done what I could."

McCoy's brows raised in question.

Spock stood, hands clenched behind his back. "I simply told him we are here, doctor."



Safe behind his barrier, Kirk struggled with the dual realities he now faced. He could not turn away from the reality of death and loss merely because it was the reality he feared above all others. Yet he would not embrace the reality of love and warmth because he knew how much he desired it, and he knew how desperately he needed to have everything back the way it was. To want something so badly sometimes denied the strings that were attached to such a gift.

There could be only one choice to life, one reality and he must not be swayed by ghosts from a future that never lived.

But amid the towering doubts and questions growing in Kirk's mind, a delicate breeze dared venture, carrying with it a word here, a touch there. It carried, too, the scent of desert flowers and red sand, and a curiously plaintive melody he had never heard before but instantly recognized. Delicate tendrils of song wound themselves around his wounded mind, soothing and healing, carrying with them the ancient promises. It spoke of companionship fulfilled and companionship abandoned. The sweet

sad song cried out to him over five thousand years of aching loneliness, begging... please return... do not go.

At first Kirk did not seem to notice what was happening, so gentle and light were the touches, so delicate and fragile the song. He did not notice the black wall of his anger and pain fading and thinning like the mists before the morning sun. And when he did recognize the contact for what it was, he froze, not reaching back but not turning away, either. At these levels of the mind, there could be no lies, no deceit. So he watched, carefully, and waited.

He listened to the sadly compelling song and understood the ancient Vulcan melody.

And the promises. The whisper-soft filaments of song promised reality, the true reality of James T. Kirk, and he gladly denied his fortress and followed the melody back, back to life, back to the Enterprise, back to Spock and McCoy... back to his friends.



Kirk's flight to consciousness was instantaneous, once he realized he wanted to be conscious. But to open his eyes, to see reality... that took much longer.

He listened. Muffled voices, familiar beeps. He waited for some sort of sixth-sense warning. Nothing.

The smell. Clean, antiseptic. A sterilized smell combined with scents he had come to associate with Chapel, McCoy and Spock.

No sour alien sound or scent forced him to deny this reality.

He opened his eyes, looking first at Spock, then McCoy and back to Spock.

His lips were suddenly dry and he licked them, but it did no good.

"You're dead," he whispered. "The Klingons killed you both."

And Spock suddenly understood the blackness of Kirk's wall, the striations of red and green, the violence and the horror. He reached for the human's hand, surprised by the chill of it, the lack of response.

"Jim, you must listen to me. What happened was not real. You were hurt in the storm at the Star Base. You are now aboard the Enterprise. You have been unconscious for exactly seven point five days. Jim..."

The Vulcan could think of nothing else to say. He watched the battle for acceptance rage in Kirk's silent eyes, watched him try to understand what he was told. The hazel eyes, clouded with a pain Spock could only surmise, turned away from him.

Spock looked up at the doctor for help but suddenly knew whether or not they lost the Captain now was up to him.

"Jim," he said softly, "I am alive. Dr. McCoy is alive. We have not been hurt. We are real. We are here."

"I know," he whispered, "I heard you." A fine tremor possessed Kirk's body. It grew in intensity until Spock realized that Jim was crying.

Ever-so-gently, Spock slipped his arm behind the Captain's shoulders. He eased the sobbing human up into his arms and laid the tousled blonde head against his shoulder.

McCoy placed his hand on Kirk's head. "Easy Jim. It's all right now. You're safe. We're all safe."

The harsh illusion of the other reality slipped away, to be buried forever in a darkened corner of Kirk's mind -- buried, but never, never to be forgotten -- as his own beloved sunlit reality returned to claim him.

He slept deeply, dreamlessly for almost two days. When he awoke, it was to see McCoy standing by his bed, smiling his usual self-assured, saved-the-Captain-again smile.

"Feelin' better?"

"Um..." was all Kirk could manage.

"I'll take that for a yes." McCoy pulled up a chair and sat down.

"What happened?" Kirk rasped.

"Well, near as we can figure, you were caught in a pretty wild storm on the star base. You were buried under a shattered tree when the search party found you. Rumor has it that a forest full of tall trees ain't the safest place to be in a lightning storm."

Kirk couldn't have agreed more.

McCoy continued. "Spock tried to contact you after we got word of the storm. You know him and his 'feelings', may T'Pau forgive me. When we couldn't raise you, he started a Phase One search."

When Kirk didn't answer, McCoy went on. "You have a hairline skull fracture and a broken back. But you're responding to treatment in your usual enthusiastic manner and it'll just be a matter of time before you're back on your feet."

Kirk's eyes drifted away from McCoy and seemed to focus on unseen horrors, remembered terrors.

"I saw you, Bones," Kirk said quietly, his words devoid of all emotion. "Both of you."

McCoy took Kirk's hand. "Jim, Spock told me about that barrier. But whatever hurt you, wasn't real. It was only induced by your injuries. The only one that got hurt was you and that was by a falling tree!"

"Perhaps not, Doctor."

Kirk and McCoy turned to look at Spock, who had entered the room unnoticed.

"What do you mean, Spock?" McCoy glared at the Vulcan, daring him to upset the Captain further.

"I have been in contact with Admiral Komack, on a high priority channel. It would seem the Captain is not the only one to have this experience. At precisely the same time all over the Federation, hundreds of humans, Vulcans and other sentient beings had similar trauma inflicted on them."

Kirk at last seemed to be listening. But McCoy still watched him closely for signs of stress.

"Go ahead, Spock," came the quiet command.

"It is the contention of those in the Federation who have been studying the phenomenon that some alien intelligence, perhaps as a means of studying our life forms, induced these alternate realities. Reaction to adversity can be a strong measure of an enemy."

McCoy seemed stunned. "A test? A bloody damned test! That's 'intelligence'. Do they think that they-it-whatever are still around?"

"That is something we will in all probability not know unless they choose to reveal themselves to us again."

McCoy snorted. That idea didn't sound at all appealing to him.

Spock paused as if choosing his words carefully. "All of the 'dreams', if you will, dealt with the individuals' greatest fears and made those fears real."

Kirk found he was unable to match the Vulcan's gaze, feared revealing too much. Greatest fears... the remembered emptiness those two deaths had left...

McCoy got up and began to pace angrily. "What a dirty thing to do! Just who in the hell do they think they are?"

Suddenly it all made sense to Kirk, everything that had led up to this moment was clear and he had to tell them -- now, before duty and routine and complacency could steal away the feeling.

"Before this happened, when I left the ship, I was very close to hating you both -- or at least I thought I was." He watched both faces but they only waited -- with patience and love evident -- as always.

"I had lost what I thought I loved the most in all of eternity -- Edith. And every time I looked at either of you, the whole thing happened all over again. It wasn't anybody's fault, it was something that had to be done, but none of that mattered... I thought I blamed you both as much as if you'd pushed her into the street yourselves."

McCoy returned to the side of the bed to stand beside Spock.

"When I woke up -- or whatever -- I had lost my freedom, my greatest enemies had formed an alliance and then I was told my ship was gone, destroyed. All of that was difficult to bear, almost beyond bearing, but I somehow held together."

He swallowed hard, took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "And then I had to watch you both die before my eyes and I wanted to die with you and I couldn't and I knew how much I loved you..."

"Jim..." McCoy could hardly control his emotions, his own eyes burning, but a look from Spock reminded him that Kirk needed this catharsis, needed to tell them what he was feeling.

"But now I'm back from that other reality and you're both here, alive and safe and unharmed. I know someday it could happen for real and I have to live with that -- we all do. For now, I just want to enjoy being alive and having you both with me."

He held out his hands and Spock and McCoy each took one.



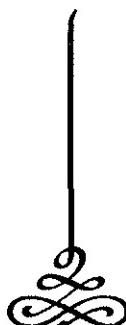
And somewhere, beyond their awareness, an intelligence watched and approved that circle of friendship.



SHORE LEAVE

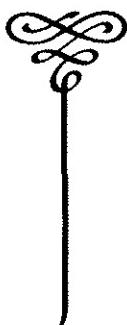
By: Lynn Syck

Through the darkened city we walk,
Sharing dreams and lives.
Through the long night we talk,
Never wanting morning to arrive.



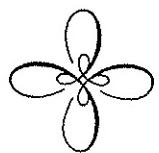
But the twinkling stars fade out,
Chased away by the rising sun.
We walk ever on and all about
Us dew-kissed flowers glisten.

Time and more than time to part,
And, oh, how terrible the cost.
I'll hold you close within my heart
So newly found, so quickly lost.



I watch you walk away from me,
Back to duty and responsibility.

The Tribble



with Troubles



By: Lynn Syck &
Laurel Ridener

Art: TACS

(a very short story outline ...)

The scene opens on the bridge, Space Station K-7 long behind them. Kirk enjoys a moment of silence, appreciating the tribbleless bridge. He admits to himself, though, that deep, deep down inside, he misses the furry little devils a tad, and wishes there had been some way to keep just one UNREPRODUCTIVE tribble on board. But since "tribble" and "unreproductive" seem to be mutually exclusive words, he lets the thought slip away...

MEANWHILE... deep, deep down inside the massive Enterprise computers, one solitary tribble remains, hiding, fearing for his hungry little existence. He is not aware of this fear, but fears in much the same instinctive way the fox fears the hunting dog...

However, the little guy is hungry, no denying that, and there really isn't much to eat, deep, deep down in the Enterprise computers. So, after several hours, and out of sheer desperation, the little tribble starts munching down on micro-chips... starving, he munches away... and the more micro-chips he munches, the more intelligence he acquires... and the more chips and intelligence he acquires, the madder he gets, both literally and colloquially.

He decides on vengeance. He will destroy Kirk; he will destroy the human race; he will conquer the galaxy, making it safe for tribble-kind for the rest of eternity.

But at the moment, he has to figure out how to get the hell out of the computer.

So he munches more chips, learns the layout of the computers and the Enterprise, and makes his escape.

And thus he lays his traps, doing away with the crew of the Enterprise one-by-one, in appropriately nasty little ticked-off-tribble ways (don't ask me, this is just an outline). His ultimate aim, however, is Kirk and Scott, because he feels they were responsible for purging the ship of tribbles (who really knows what happened to all those tribbles...)

The Ticked-off Tribble hangs around Kirk's cabin, lurking in the cooling/heating ducts, behind the couch, in the bathroom behind the shower curtain... which is his undoing.

Now, because of the transformation caused by intelligence and all those chemicals and plastics in the micro-chips, the Terrible Tribble is unable to mate with himself (which sounds a little sick, anyway, when you stop to think about it) and he becomes almost as desperate that way as he was hungry.

You have to remember, all this episode with the tribbles and the Klingons and Sherman's Planet has been one pretty hair-raising experience -- literally speaking. Kirk's hairbrush is sitting on his bureau, covered with long glistening strands of silken blondness.

Whilst hiding in the shower, the Terrible Tribble spies this... and falls in love, desperately, passionately, totally in love with this long, only slightly-oblong tribble-look-alike. They mate, producing lots of little very angry, bristlie tribbles (don't ask me how, this is science fiction; anything's possible). They're all madder than hell, not to mention hungry, and off to the computers they go.

And boy do they eat! The entire shop reverberates with the purring, peeling sheets of metal from the walls, shaking the nacelles, jarring the screws out of the doorknobs. Between the fact of the horribly eliminated crewmembers, and this awful racket, Kirk finally decides something's wrong on board the Good Ship Enterprise.

But before he goes investigating, he wants to spruce up a little. It's then that he notices his favorite hairbrush is missing.

Suspitions surge, and he realizes with a sickening lurch just what the purring is, and what's been doing--in his people, and where his hairbrush is.

He calls for Spock.

They figure all this out, but finally decide that hanging around picking up all these bristlie little varmints and beaming them elsewhere won't work this time; these tribbles are intelligent and ticked. They ain't gonna stand for nobody picking them up and carting them off to the transporter room. Besides, when cornered, they attack and with bristles thrust forward, scratch like hell...

Desperation on board the Enterprise. Kirk decides to self-destruct. Spock stops him; there has to be a better way, right? After all, the tribbles are half hair-brush, maybe they could stick them down with some of the cheaper brand-X hairspray.

Kirk agrees, commends Spock on his brilliance and sends him down to a nearby convenient planet to buy up their complete stock of the cheaper brand-X hairspray.

Several hours later, Spock returns, hair done up very nicely in a modified pageboy. He shrugs away Kirk's questions with a "Well, I had to have some reason for buying all this stuff..."

Hours, and appropriate scenes later, the tribbles are all under control.

Stiff as boards, bristles sticking straight out, the now-demure tribbles are entrusted to the Flower Plant where they take active part in the Annual Artificial Flower Arrangement Competitions (and usually win...).

Kirk breathes a tremendous sigh of relief, decides to either get a crewcut or let his hair grow, just so long as he never has to see another hairbrush again.

Spock decides to keep the modified pageboy cut, says it's a pleasant change...

All the micro-chips are replaced or restored to the Enterprise computers, and all go off merrily down the celestial road, on the next adventure awaiting our golden heroes...

HOWEVER, deep, deep down in the central computers, there remains one tiny bristlie, STARVING tribble... munching down on the new, updated computer chips, gaining intelligence... and giggling insanely.....



THE OTHER SIDE



OF FOREVER



By: Kathy Milligan

Art: Steve Wilson

Kirk took his place at the apex of the landing party formation. Behind him, the Guardian swirled and smoked, awaiting a new question; silently offering up the past.

"Let's get the hell out of here," he said.

The team materialized in the Enterprise transporter room. Once released from the grip of the beam, Scotty looked around thankfully. The nightmare was over! Those terrible moments of wondering whether or not they would ever see the ship again had been among the worst of his life. The engineer turned, expecting to see his own intense relief mirrored in the faces of his captain and fellow crewmembers. With a shock of surprise, he watched the Captain make a direct line for the door, bypassing greetings or explanations of any kind. Instead, Kirk threw a terse, "Mr. Spock, please take the conn," over his shoulder as he headed into the corridor. Kirk probably did not even hear Spock's dutiful "Yes, sir," in response. It was certain that he did not see the thinly veiled concern in the Vulcan's dark eyes.

Dr. McCoy would have seen Spock's visible emotion had his own feelings been less in evidence. Although he had recovered from the worst effects of his accidental overdose of cordrazine, the doctor was still reeling from the disorientation of coming to his senses in a world that time forgot. McCoy had made two serious mistakes on the planet's surface. One had been his attempt to prevent the traffic accident, although he hadn't known it at the time. The other...

"Guess I'd better go after him," muttered McCoy as he stepped off the transporter platform.

Spock moved quickly, blocking his path. "I think not, Doctor."

"And who are you?" spat McCoy, "the new psychological expert? How would you, of all people, know what he's feeling now?"

Spock ignored the jibe. "He will require some time alone. We must permit him that."

McCoy opened his mouth to reply but was interrupted by the Chief Engineer.

"Is somethin' wrong? What happened to the Captain down there?"

"Events of personal consequence, Mr. Scott, which are best left to the Captain's discretion," Spock answered. "Dr. McCoy, I respectfully suggest that you report to sickbay for a physical examination. The cordrazine...?"

McCoy turned and exited without another word. The other members of the landing party dispersed silently with questions in their eyes.

Spock turned to Scotty, "And if you will excuse me as well, Mr. Scott, I am expected on the bridge."

"Aye, sir," Scotty felt confused and oddly excluded from the events of the last several hours. He shook his head. What did Spock mean by 'personal consequences?' What could have happened on that chilly, twilight planet to alter the young Captain so? What could have set McCoy and Spock at each other's throats like that? Scotty paused for a moment, then turned to check on his own department. Those time distortion emanations were still fouling up the 'bairns', no doubt...



James Kirk could not remember feeling caged aboard his own ship before. He wanted nothing more than to find something to tear apart; to punish himself and everyone else for this terrible thing which had taken place; to run somewhere and keep on running...

The Captain's cabin was too small to contain the scope of his violent, warring emotions. He raged around the room, pacing with restive frustration, trying to drink enough to make himself numb, then stifling the impulse to smash his bottle against the wall. The alcohol only made him feel worse. He abandoned his effort to drown himself in it before he became more maudlin than he already was.

If he could stay angry, maybe he would be all right. But was anger strong enough to combat the desolation, the guilt, the searing loss... the bleakness, the emptiness he felt tonight? Could it save him from the wildfire tearing through him, threatening to reduce him to emotional ruin?

Whenever he closed his eyes, she was there. If he paused for even a moment, he saw a cloud of dark hair... the sidelong glance of those lovely eyes... heard her lilting laughter... and then the squeal of brakes and a tearing scream...

He should have reported to the bridge after all. Kirk left his quarters, but checked himself in mid-stride as he imagined the sympathetic faces on the bridge. Word would have gotten around by now. He thought of all eyes full of knowledge... pity...

Kirk went, instead, to the observation deck. His need for the affirmation of the stars was greater than his need to be alone.

The few crewmembers present on the deck looked as though they, too, preferred to keep to themselves. No one intruded on the Captain's privacy as he found an empty corner and watched the vibrant points of light wheel away from him. The stars... the stars that man would reach and conquer someday, Edith had said... someday. Those are the days worth living for... that's what she said. Only Edith hadn't lived long enough to see her predictions come true. She wouldn't have anyway... she hadn't even lived long enough to have her meeting with President Roosevelt in that other time stream. Edith would have loved that. She would have charmed him right into signing that peace treaty

of hers... but then, that was the whole problem, wasn't it? Right idea, wrong decade. Right woman, wrong century...

"Edith Keeler died over three hundred years ago, Jim," said a voice behind him.

"Funny," Kirk answered. "It seems like only this morning." He moved to leave. "Excuse me, Doctor."

"Wait a minute!"

Kirk stopped, but he did not turn around.

"I want to talk to you," said McCoy.

"Not now."

"You aren't going to let me apologize? Say 'I'm sorry'?"

Kirk turned his head to look at the doctor. "Forget it."

"Not unless you do. Jim, listen. I should know better than to question..."

"Perfectly understandable. Good night." Kirk began once again to move towards the door.

McCoy continued, unable to leave the situation unresolved. "... your judgment on something like this, and I feel terrible about what I said back there. I know how it must have..."

Kirk's icy words cut across McCoy's efforts. "I said forget it."

"Jim? I didn't know..."

But the Captain was already gone.



First Officer Spock relinquished the command seat when the skeletal third shift crew came on. It was quite late, after 0200. However, Spock had not considered requesting a replacement, even after the schedule he had kept for the last several days, slaving and puzzling over a makeshift computer in an antiquated rented room.

Nor did sleep tempt him now. Spock planned to run the Guardian tricorder data through the ship's computers and document it for the Federation historical information bank.

But, contrary to his original intention, he instructed the lift to take him to Deck 5. Spock reflected on the lifeless watch-shift he had just supervised which had been civilly endured by the rest of the crew. Something had been missing since the landing party's return. The younger officers always looked forward to the Captain's high humor, buoyant spirits, and tart observations after a planetside expedition. Kirk usually offered a few words of praise to his subordinates for a job well done, and Spock noticed that the human members of the crew worked in a more productive manner when such rituals were observed. The usual exchanges and interplay had always impressed the First Officer as completely unnecessary and superfluous, and therefore Spock was intrigued to discover that he had missed these exchanges as well.

The crew had not seen the Captain upon his return today.

Spock had seen him; seen his face, the look in his eyes...

If the Captain was in need of solace, logic dictated that it would best be offered by a human member of the crew; someone who shared such feelings -- or at least professed to understand them. A Vulcan could be of little assistance at this time.

And yet, Spock found himself standing silently in the corridor outside the Captain's quarters. He remained there, mentally attempting to explain his actions. The Captain had assigned himself to first watch in the morning. Therefore, Spock logically assumed that Kirk had been asleep for several hours.

But still Spock stood.

If he did push the door signal, what would he say? What could he say? The Captain had taken the only possible course of action in allowing Edith Keeler to die. Kirk knew this. Each man knew that the other understood the terrible implications of letting the moment pass, changing history and the face of the world forever. What more could there be to discuss?

The fact that the Captain continued to feel anguish about his decision was hardly something they could talk about. And even if Spock understood the feeling, he would be unable to admit it, even for his Captain. Even for his friend.

But, somehow, he was equally unable to do nothing at all.

Spock pushed the door signal.

The entryway opened. No greeting was made, but the door was open. Spock entered the room, and the door slid shut behind him.

Kirk sat behind a table, supporting his head with his hands as if his thoughts had assumed a leaden, physical weight. He did not acknowledge Spock's presence. The Captain's face was stony; his expression as steely as when they had beamed up from the planet.

Spock thought he should say or do something, but he was clearly out of his element. Spock had been capable of counseling the Captain when they discussed the problem confronting them; it had been his duty, then, to present the facts, to offer an informed opinion, and to point out the consequences of every possible action or inaction.

But now... now that the decision had been made and action taken, it was only Kirk who had to deal with the consequences. History had resumed its former shape, the Enterprise had been restored, and a young woman had met an early death. Edith's death had touched Spock almost not at all. It affected him only insofar as it affected the man sitting across from him in the shadows. The fact that the Vulcan was affected by Kirk's grief was an uncomfortable observation for the emotionless First Officer to make. Even as a private, unspoken observation.

The crew of the Enterprise had met with personal tragedy before. There had been other deaths and disasters, and in every case, it was the Captain who was most adept at comforting others. Kirk was the one to offer up the right words at the right time, the one who could be depended upon in every kind of crisis; the leader who saw to the needs of others before he gave a thought to himself. Who would comfort him?



Spock remembered Kirk saying that sometimes simply being there was of great comfort to a grieving friend. Someone to listen, someone to understand. Spock could be there. And he could listen. And as for understanding... that was something still to be determined.

Spock sat in a nearby chair. He said nothing.

Kirk remained where he was, motionless and staring.

The silence was long, but oddly comfortable. As Spock had already observed to himself, there were a number of things that need not be said.

Finally, Kirk spoke in a voice not quite his own, "She was beautiful, wasn't she?"

"Yes."

"And bright. So bright. Unusual."

"A most remarkable woman."

"Yes..." Kirk lapsed into silence once more.

This time the silence was broken, albeit tentatively, by Spock. "Captain... Jim... If you were to make your decision again... ?"

"It would be the same, of course. I just..." He stopped. Then, "I... just... didn't want to have to be the one. She trusted me, and I... I loved her, and I..."

"You did not kill her."

"Spock. You were there. You saw it."

"You allowed her to die as she did before. As she was meant to die. Dr. McCoy was not there before to prevent the accident. The choice was never actually yours."

"But... she was with me, this time. She was there because she was with me. Was I there? Before?"

"No. Each time the events are played out, the most recent reality becomes reality. There can be no memory of other time streams, the other versions or bending of events, because they never existed. You were not there, before. You were there today only to restore the shape of time which had been distorted and changed by Dr. McCoy's intervention."

"I wonder who..."

"Yes?"

"Nothing." There was a pause. "I was just wondering who she was with," he added abruptly. "Before. What he was like. How she felt about him."

Spock's reply was carefully rational. "She may have been crossing the street for any reason. To run an errand; to keep an appointment. She might have been alone until the day she died, with no... understanding... no one to see the things she saw. There was, at least, that."

"What?"

"You."

Kirk looked at Spock with surprise. This was the first time his deadly expression had lifted to allow anything else in. With hesitation, he asked, "Do you think... ? That it might -- I might -- have made a difference? To her... to... all of it?"

Spock's face remained expressionless, but his voice sounded a shade deeper than usual. "You ask that? You ask me... what difference you make to the lives you touch?" Spock stood, willing himself to answer the question put to him. "I should imagine it meant a great deal."

The look in Kirk's eyes lightened. He said, simply, "Thank you."

"You are welcome." Spock walked to the door. "One more question. Given a choice; would you forget that Edith ever existed? Or would you willingly remember her? Even now?"

Kirk thought about the question before he answered it. He said, "I want to remember every minute of it. Every second. All of it."

"Then all is well. With time, the suffering will ease, for it is not true regret. You do not feel that you made a mistake. There is no shame."

Kirk looked at his friend intently. "That's a very interesting observation, Mr. Spock. A personal philosophy of yours?"

Spock hesitated. Then he said softly, "I... understand."

Just before the door slid shut again, the Vulcan added, "She was right, Jim. The days ahead are worth living for. Rest, my friend."

"Good night, Spock," said Kirk as he was left with his private thoughts. Kirk knew there would be many more hours of sorrowful reflection before he came to terms with his feelings for Edith and his own part in her death, but Spock had reminded him that he did not have to face the future alone.

There was someone else who was feeling very much alone tonight. Now that Spock had led the Captain through the maze of his worst doubts, Kirk could see that Dr. McCoy must be blaming himself for initiating the entire ordeal.

Spock's advice about getting some rest would have to wait. Kirk glanced at the half-full bottle of liquor which had managed to survive his earlier rampage. It would make a good peace offering. No time like the present.

Kirk picked up the bottle. He knew McCoy would be awake. Over the first glass, he would tell Bones that if it hadn't been for his ill-advised leap through the time portal, Kirk never would have met Edith, and he wouldn't have missed that for anything. Over the second, perhaps the doctor would share some of his own stories about Edith... and after that, maybe sleep would come.

Kirk lifted the bottle into the air. In a few minutes, he would be making a toast to present company. But now, alone in his quarters, he made one to absent friends.

"To you, Edith," he said.

In the Deep Places of Earth

Story and Art by Merle Decker

Kirk stumbled and fell heavily to his knees. Pain stabbed in one knee as the sharp, knife-like edges of a stone slashed through pants and into vulnerable flesh, while the rough rock floor abraded his outflung hands, drawing unexpected tears to his eyes. The physical discomfort brushed away the enveloping cloud of fear and growing terror which up to now had confused his mind. He held his feelings at arms length, examining them clearly as something separate, apart from himself, for the first time since this nightmare had begun. He breathed a quiet thanks for the mind-clearing pain.

A flash of movement in the sickly, almost nonexistent light, drew his eyes. "Anders!" he shouted to the running figure. The call fell upon deaf ears, for the man did not stop nor falter in his headlong flight. Kirk smothered a curse as he staggered to his feet, knee throbbing angrily as he ran in hot pursuit of the fleeing security guard. Applying a sudden burst of speed, Kirk pulled abreast of the man, grabbed a handful of shirt, and slammed him hard against the cold, unyielding surface of the tunnel wall. "Ensign!" he shouted, shaking him roughly.

The pale, sweat-beaded face shuddered, the wild, unseeing eyes focusing on Kirk. "Captain?" Anders' voice cracked with barely contained terror.

Kirk slowly loosened his biting, steel-like grip until it was simply a support for the trembling man. "Yes," he whispered. "You can't let it get to you. You have to control." Kirk paused for a moment before continuing. "We both do."

"But it's following, it's..." The young officer's eyes rolled whitely in his head as he looked fearfully back up the passage.

"No it's not! Can't you feel it? The fear's... less." The anguished eyes locked with Kirk's, tentative hope flickering in them.

Kirk forced a smile of encouragement. "Come on, we need to rest, at least for a short while." He drew his half-resisting companion to a narrow rock ledge on one side of the tunnel and motioned him to sit. Kirk slid down next to him, sitting propped up against the cold stone. Rolling up his pants leg to briefly check his injured knee, he noted it was still bleeding, but it would not incapacitate him. He tore off a strip of shirt and bound the deep gash as best he could, then sank back to rest, trying to still his frantically beating heart.

It seemed like they had been lost in this maze of tunnels for years, not a mere handful of hours. Exploration of the planet, Canaris 3, had been so safe, so routine; too damn easy, he thought disgustedly, just poking around in a ruined city which Spock suspected was of Preserver origin. It was a find of some importance, since this was the first large scale Preserver site to have been located. He admitted to a surge of pride, knowing Spock's name would be tied to this discovery.

It had been while wandering about in the deserted ruins that Kirk had unknowingly triggered some long-set trap. One moment had been walking along, exploring the crumbling walls and empty rooms, and in the next the floor dropped out from beneath his feet and he was tumbling into dark oblivion.

Spock must be going quietly crazy, Kirk thought with certainty, logically tearing the place apart looking for him. Only he wasn't in it, he was under it. Still, he wasn't in this alone, Kirk reminded himself, turning a sympathetic, worried gaze on his too-young companion. It was Anders' bad luck to have been with his Captain when the trap had been sprung. Regaining consciousness in total darkness had been a shock, but the boy had reacted well to the unknown. They had tried their communicators, then shouting till their throats were raw, all to no avail.

Eventually, after exploring the rough-hewn boundaries of their prison with outstretched hands and hesitant fingers, they had discovered the gaping mouth of a passage. Cool air whispered past them, urging them forward into the unknown. Deciding action was better than sitting helplessly in the dark, they began following the passage's tortuous meanderings downward. At first they were guided simply by touch in a lightless world, feeling their way like blind men. Then sight gradually returned as the tunnel became dimly lit by phosphorescent patches of fungus trailing wetly from walls and ceiling. They found themselves wandering in a maze, a honeycomb of tunnels hollowed out of solid rock, as passages began intersecting with increasing frequency as they continued to descend.

It had not been bad at first. Kirk had his unvoiced worries about food and water, but he had every confidence that somehow Spock would locate them long before they became problems. Then wide traces of glistening slime were found emerging from side passages, crossing their chosen path, then disappearing down one of the intersecting tunnels. Slowly the air grew heavy with some fetid, unwholesome odor reminiscent of a charnel house. With these outward signs of something horribly alive in the endless corridors, the fear began. At first it was only a faint tickling at the back of the mind, but had built to an overwhelming flood when the first soft slithering sounds echoed faintly in the distance. They ran.

Kirk looked around uneasily in the unwholesome light, as the all too familiar feeling began to grow again -- but this time he was prepared. He heard Ensign Anders' breathing quicken to short gasps.

"Ensign," Kirk said softly. The security guard started as if jabbed with a hot iron. The young man looked at his Captain, shame vying with fear for dominance on his face.

"I'm... I'm sorry, sir. I don't know what's wrong with me." Anders looked like he was ready to either cry or be sick.

Kirk laid a reassuring hand on his arm. "It's not you. Look at it. It's coming from outside. Fight it!"

"Outside?" Anders whispered.

"Can't you feel it? How it ebbs and flows... as whatever it is approaches or retreats?"

The guard nodded mutely, face tightening with new resolve as he fought his inner demons.

"Come on," Kirk said, rising awkwardly to his feet as he favored his injured leg. "We'd better get moving."

Spock slowly and methodically ran his tricorder in a 360-degree arc for the fifth time. Wind moaned desolately like a lost soul among the fallen walls and crumbled decay of the abandoned city.

"Well, Spock?" McCoy demanded, impatience, heavily colored by worry, sharpening his voice.

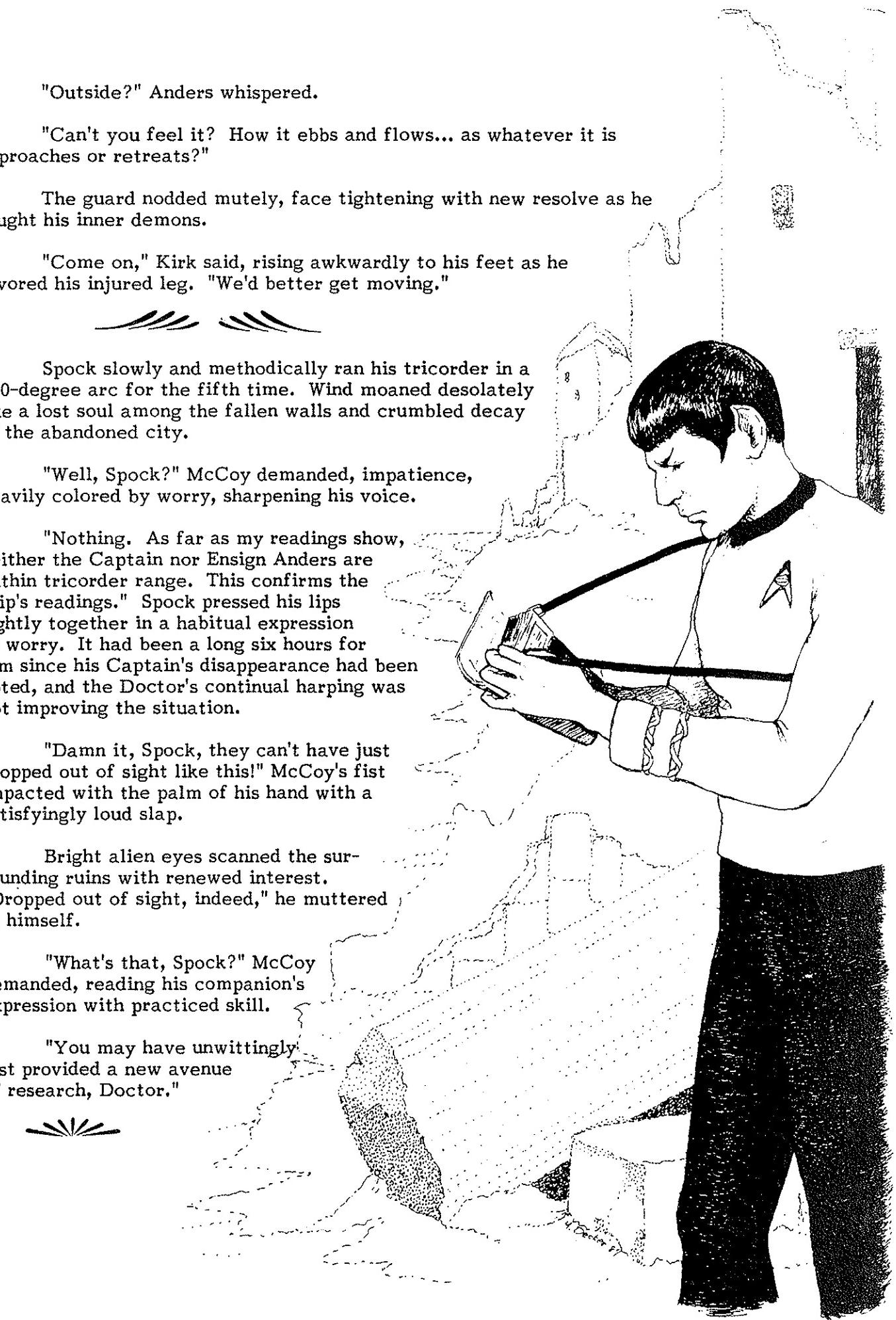
"Nothing. As far as my readings show, neither the Captain nor Ensign Anders are within tricorder range. This confirms the ship's readings." Spock pressed his lips tightly together in a habitual expression of worry. It had been a long six hours for him since his Captain's disappearance had been noted, and the Doctor's continual harping was not improving the situation.

"Damn it, Spock, they can't have just dropped out of sight like this!" McCoy's fist impacted with the palm of his hand with a satisfyingly loud slap.

Bright alien eyes scanned the surrounding ruins with renewed interest. "Dropped out of sight, indeed," he muttered to himself.

"What's that, Spock?" McCoy demanded, reading his companion's expression with practiced skill.

"You may have unwittingly just provided a new avenue of research, Doctor."



A blank wall faced the two men, a fact as unyielding and as final as judgment day. There was no escape in this direction.

"We'll have to go back," Kirk whispered, exhaustion roughening his voice. "Back to that last intersection."

"No..." Anders stood pressed against the cold stone, as if he could somehow will his all too solid form past this final barrier. "It'll be there. It'll get us..." Hysteria was a hair's breadth away.

"And if whatever it is traps us down here with no way out?" Kirk felt ashamed, but it was necessary to let the boy's own fear drive him to retrace his steps.

The journey back seemed twice as long, even though the floor slanted downward making the way easier. Anticipation of what might await them at journey's end was enough to drive anyone to madness -- it was only Kirk's indomitable will that kept them both moving forward.

They finally stumbled into a domed chamber, knees trembling with an exhaustion more emotional than physical. It was a large open space, with eight tunnels radiating out from it like spokes from a wheel. There were six remaining choices for them, any one of which might possibly lead them to the surface. The thought flickered briefly across Kirk's mind that none of them might be the answer, but it was as quickly rejected. His jaw firmed with typical stubborn determination. He refused to give up that easily -- there was a way out of any trap.

"Which way?" Anders croaked, pale eyes darting nervously at the gaping toothless mouths of the tunnels.

Kirk didn't answer, just paced about the perimeter of the chamber, carefully examining each possibility. Two ways had already been tried, leaving six unexplored. He had originally chosen the only tunnel which sloped upwards, and that had led to a dead end. The others either ran straight, or sloped further downward into the bowels of the earth. Kirk paused before one gaping hole and studied the path for a long time.

"Come on, Anders, I think this is the best way," Kirk motioned with his head while wiping the beads of sweat from his brow. It had turned hot -- hot and damp. Even the rock seemed to sweat, beads of oily moisture gleaming from its surface.

"But, Captain, it's going down. We need to go up!"

"I know, but I feel a breath of moving air from this one. At least it's something to go on." He smile encouragingly. "It's all we have."

They both stiffened simultaneously, heads turning in unison to stare at the tunnel which had led them here. A sound, so faint as to be almost nonexistent, whispered from its depths. The distinct sound of slithering echoed faintly, that and a growing stench of decay. An overwhelming urge to flee assaulted both men, and terror became a tangible, living thing.

Anders let out a scream, horrifying in its utter lack of humanity, and flew like a mad thing down the nearest tunnel -- away from the approaching horror.

"Anders!" Kirk yelled. There was no choice -- he had to follow. The terrified man had chosen by pure chance the least desirable-looking of the tunnels, so driven by his inner demons he no longer reasoned. It was more dimly lit than the others, and the air was unwholesome.

The eerie sound of pounding feet echoed crazily ahead as Kirk pushed to catch up with the fleeing man. The light dimmed as the grotesque patches of fungus thinned until there was barely enough light to keep the dark at bay. Kirk stumbled on a half-seen jagged place in the floor, but caught himself in time. For safety's sake he was forced to slow his pace.

A long drawn-out scream echoed ahead, thinning quickly into silence. Kirk rushed forward to the razor edge of death. Pulling himself up short at the very last moment, he staggered back, his heart in his throat, staring down into the stygian dark of a bottomless pit. Slowly, he sank to his knees at the very edge. No sound broke the silence. "Anders!" Kirk shouted despairingly. The only answer to his call was the distorted echo of his own voice reverberating in the pit. He hefted a small pebble in his hand, then consigned it to the dark. After many seconds a soft splash came faintly to his ears as the stone hit water. Kirk sat back on his heels, staring mutely into the yawning blackness, the familiar sense of loss and guilt settling like a cold weight on his heart. The boy had been so young, he thought numbly, so young to die like this.

Kirk finally stirred, rising heavily to his feet. He turned to retrace his steps, but could not help casting one last, lingering glance of farewell at the unmarked grave of his crewman. The lurking dark pressed twice as heavily upon him now that he was alone. Only by pure force of will did he force his lagging feet to carry him back to the chamber of tunnels, to face whatever horror might be awaiting him.

The chamber was empty. Kirk paused uncertainly as he crossed the open expanse of floor. There lying directly in his path, was a trail of slime at least a yard in width. His eyes followed its course connecting two of the tunnels with its disgusting spoor. Whatever it was had been there during the short time he had pursued Anders. The strong stench of decay, like something dead many days, billowed from the exiting tunnel. Kirk's gorge rose in his throat. He turned and ran into the downward path he had chosen.



"It is as I thought," Spock stated evenly, carefully examining the tricorder's readings.

McCoy had trailed the Vulcan for almost an hour, stumbling over rubble, poking into ruined chambers, stirring up clouds of choking dust. During that time he had been unable to get more than an occasional grunt out of his preoccupied companion. His patience, never one of his strong points, had finally run out. "Spock..." McCoy growled threateningly, "what is it?"

"It seems the foundation of this complex is composed of an alloy. It neutralizes sensor beams, rendering them inoperative," Spock answered calmly, ignoring the Doctor's outburst. "The Preservers obviously wanted what is below the city to remain veiled from the curious."

"Below?" McCoy leaned forward, hands perched belligerently on hips.

"Tunnels, passageways, shafts, chambers -- I believe a whole warren is hollowed out below this city and extends far into the plain on all sides. The shielding prevents accurate readings, but there are weakened areas where I have been able to get partial scans."

"Perhaps the ship's sensors could locate Jim through those weak spots?" McCoy asked hopefully.

Spock shook his head, killing the Doctor's hopes. "I'm afraid not. As I just stated, sensor readings are useless here. We will have to rely on more primitive means." The Vulcan drew his phaser and without a word of explanation fired it point-blank at the pavement at their feet. McCoy jumped back with a curse.

"It is resistant to phaser fire," Spock yelled over the roar of rocks and dirt spewing like a geyser into the air. The growing crater glowed cherry red at the edges. "But not totally so."

With a hollow boom the last resistance gave way and the deepening pit collapsed suddenly inward upon itself. Dust settled slowly, revealing a gaping darkness lying open to the amethyst sky.

"A tunnel," McCoy whispered in the silent air.

"I believe this answers the question of what happened to the Captain."

"But in all of that..." McCoy waved his arm at the city and the wide plain beyond, "... and without sensors? How are we going to find him?"

"Search parties," Spock answered in an infuriatingly level manner. "I can only extrapolate that sensor readings will be more efficacious once past the surface. It would seem... inefficient to build all levels with this alloy. Unless my initial reasoning is at fault, the lower levels should be composed of normal planetary base rock. Anyone below ground should then be able to use tricorders to locate the missing men."

"Well, Mr. Spock," McCoy demanded, "... so what are we waiting for?"



Kirk's mouth was parched dry with fear. The only thing keeping his flagging steps moving was the terror which filled the very air he breathed, and dogged every movement. He closed his eyes, shutting out his sepulchral surroundings. Down, down, down. He had gone too far in the wrong direction, and it was too late to retrace his steps. Something was behind him -- he could feel it on a subliminal level, like the chill of death passing its skeletal hands over his heart. He shivered, and stumbled on.

After what seemed like hours, the tunnel leveled off abruptly. The way ahead branched like a T. Right or left? Kirk grinned mirthlessly -- it really didn't matter anymore. He turned left.

The passage gradually grew larger, with a height lost in the shifting shadows. Kirk halted, passing his hand over his eyes in disbelief. There was light ahead that looked like real sunlight, not the corpse-glow given off by the ever present fungus. Hope, against all logic, gave new life to his steps. He rushed forward, only to be stopped by the sight of a large, gaping door or entranceway which had been cut into the

side of the tunnel. It was from this that the pale, natural-looking light streamed out like the essence of life. It was approximately twenty feet in diameter and thick bars had at one time barred passage into its wide mouth. Now each thick metal column was bent and twisted outward. Kirk stood staring at the wildly contorted bars, each of which was as thick as his upper arm. Someone or something had escaped, fleeing into these tunnels -- something strong enough to mold the heavy metal like wet clay.

He drew closer, observing that the metal was rusted and pitted with age. It was a welcome thought to realize that whatever violence had taken place had occurred centuries before, perhaps as long ago as the ruination of the surface city. Had a disaster of some kind caused the abandonment of this world, or just the slow wearing of time on a people and culture? Kirk shook his head. "Speculation later," he chided himself. "The first order of business is survival." Yet he could not help wondering what had happened to the Preservers, why they had built and then abandoned this complex. They were a mystery yet unsolved. For millennia they had nurtured and transplanted peoples and cultures in danger of extinction, and then one day they themselves had simply disappeared, perhaps prey to the very forces they had fought for so long.

Kirk cautiously eased through the twisted metal and stepped into the narrow corridor. His gaze was drawn upward to a thin strip of luminous material trailing down the tunnel's length -- it was from this source that the light streamed. It might prove to be a straw hope, yet it was the first indication that intelligent purpose still operated in this deserted world. If this system still functioned, then perhaps there were others at the end of the tunnel, perhaps even a means of escape.

Kirk walked for what seemed forever. He lost all track of time, and was finally growing weary when he turned a sharp corner to find himself on a narrow lip of stone, staring awe-struck out over a cavern of such immense proportions that its true scale was lost to his mind. The thought briefly occurred to him that he had somehow returned to the planet's surface; yet, even in that moment, he subconsciously felt the immense weight of the earth's crust pressing down upon him. Far in the distance he could see the cavern's opposite wall rising as out of the mists of time, and then he realized with a start that it was miles away.

Pale light, like that of an early spring morning, radiated gently from the ceiling's surface. Small patches of thin, white cloud floated a mile or so above the cavern's floor, drifting aimlessly in the air currents. There must be some mechanism still in operation supplying fresh air from the surface, he thought, for he could feel a breeze pushing gently against his face. Fifty feet below, the cavern floor was thickly carpeted by lavish growth, a jungle by any standards. Yet from his perch, Kirk could see that the center was clear, occupied by what seemed to be a maze of high white walls, without trace of roof or door.

As long as it's free of the Minotaur Kirk thought wryly. Then with something akin to amazement he realized he was alone; his constant companion -- fear -- was gone. There remained a slight tickle of disquietude, enough to make him keep wanting to look over his shoulder, but his thoughts were free at last from the foreign influence.

He began a reckless descent down the rock cliff, spurred on by the thought that such an obviously important installation should have a direct route to the surface. It was up to him to find it. Logical, he thought, and the image of his cool First Officer floated before his mind's eye. "So where are you when I need you, Mr. Spock?" he muttered, only half in jest as he scrambled down the last few feet of rockface.

Reaching ground level, Kirk scanned his new surroundings with trained, wary eyes. Before him was a solid wall of vegetation, stretching in both directions for as far as he could see. Some of the plant life were normal shades of green, but many others were sickly yellow, blood-red, purple, blue, and even midnight black. No one world could ever be responsible for such a discordant, uneasy array. On a subliminal level it made his skin crawl.

Still, these feelings did not give him pause, for Kirk's goal was already set -- the white-walled maze at the cavern's heart. However, there was one small obstacle to the execution of his plan; the matted vines and tangled trees lying between him and his objective.

Hands resting lightly on hips, he surveyed the situation. Curving round the edge of the cavern stretched a smooth, grey floor approximately twenty feet in width. It wasn't metal, yet it was as cold and unyielding as metal beneath his feet. He wondered briefly if it had been designed as some type of fence to keep the foliage at bay. Even now, nothing living touched its unmarked surface. Yet, for him, it was an open road.

Five minutes walking brought Kirk to the opening of a natural trail. Experiencing only a slight hesitation, he plunged inside. Within moments he found himself in another world, a world of quiet, a world of muted colors shimmering in a pale, diffuse light. It should have been peaceful, yet it was not. A red alert signal went off in Kirk's brain. It was too quiet, with only small unidentified rustlings to follow his cautious progress forward.

Soon a small stream cut across his path, blocking his way. Kirk jumped it easily, his feet sinking into the opposite bank's moist black earth. Then he saw that he was not the first to cross. Sunk deeply into the ground was the indentation of another foot. Whatever had left this mark was huge, the impression being two hands breadth in length and ending in the marks of sharp claws. Kirk knelt by it, fingers tracing its outline. He looked up with wary eyes, studying the oppressive vegetation. This was not a vague imagining; this was tangible, real -- there was animal life in this underground world, very large animal life if this print was any indication. He drew his phaser.



"Spock," McCoy's voice wavered as he laid a shaking hand on the Vulcan's arm. "I don't think I..."

Dark eyes observed the sweat-beaded face of the Doctor with concern. "I assume you are still bothered with the unease you referred to earlier?"

"Damn it, Spock. It isn't unease! It's stark, bloody terror!"

Spock glanced back at the white faces of the two security guards, a slight frown darkening his brow. "I do not know what is causing this, Doctor. I pick up no unusual readings on my tricorder, and this fear reaction does not seem to be affecting me."

"It figures," McCoy managed to mutter under his breath.

"Come, we must proceed," the Vulcan said firmly. "At this present depth I am beginning to pick up a large number of life-form readings. This does not seem logical, but it is registering nonetheless. The source is approximately half a mile deeper and 2.1 miles southwest of our present location."

"Spock, that's what I'm trying to tell you, I don't know if I can go much further. And I don't believe Peterson or LaComb can either."

"The Captain needs us." The Vulcan's voice was very soft.

"Don't you think I know that, you damned Vulcan!" McCoy hissed, suddenly furious. He closed his eyes, fighting a silent war within himself. "I'll try," he finally whispered, "but if it gets any worse I won't be of much use to myself or to anyone else -- the Captain included."

Spock nodded in acknowledgement and continued to lead the way downward.



Kirk slowed to a gradual halt as his gaze worriedly scanned his surroundings. It took him a few minutes to realize what was wrong; silence, unnatural silence. All the small, ever-present background noises of the jungle had suddenly... stopped. Ahead, over the tops of the trees, he could see a single finger of pale stone standing like a solitary guard to the white-walled center of the cavern. It was not much further.

Kirk forced himself forward through the wall of unnerving silence. He took one step, then another... Without warning the jungle behind him erupted into a furious, living whirlwind of tooth and claw, as a multi-legged animal, the size of a large mastiff, leapt straight at his throat. He barely had time to spin about to meet the charge before the creature was on him. The phaser was knocked from his hand as a double-edged row of razor sharp teeth closed like a steel trap on his right forearm. Agony lanced like fire down his arm, but there wasn't time to acknowledge its existence. The force of the charge knocked Kirk to the ground, and he now found a vicious, nightmare mask slavering inches away from his face. Kirk's left hand had closed about the beast's throat, keeping its snapping jaws from closing the inches needed to tear away his face. They rolled together in the packed dirt of the trail. The creature's clawed feet ripped furiously at the unprotected chest and belly of its prey. With a last burst of inhuman strength, Kirk thrust a booted foot against the scaled underbelly of the animal, tossing it from him. It landed on its back a few, scant feet away. He groped frantically for his phaser, fingers tightening about its grip, just as the beast gathered itself for another spring. A brilliant lance of white fire caught the animal in mid-air, where its silhouette glowed incandescently for a brief moment and was gone.



Kirk sank back against the unyielding earth, all his remaining energy expended in the one, brief burst for survival. His eyes slowly focused on the far distant ceiling, reality intruding once more. He checked a moan in his throat as he rolled over. Blood soaked the front of

his torn shirt, where sharp claws had rent the vulnerable flesh, and his right forearm dripped red where razor-sharp teeth had closed. His stomach turned as he looked at his wounds -- deep, long slashes on his chest and abdomen. He carefully removed his shirt, tearing it into long strips which he used to bind the worst wounds. It wasn't enough, he realized, but it would have to do until he could get to McCoy.

He sat back, attempting to block out the burning pain, trying to think clearly. He was so damned thirsty he felt he could have drained a river, but the only water he knew of was that stream he had crossed an hour earlier. In his present condition he wasn't sure he could make it that far. The 'city', on the other hand, was only a few minutes away, and there might be a source of water there.

He glanced down at the already red-soaked bandages and realized his chances of getting out of this little adventure had just dropped dramatically. Struggling painfully to his feet, he swayed unsteadily as a wave of dizziness swept over him. He really had no other choice. He would go on.



The jungle ended as abruptly as it had begun. Kirk staggered out onto the unexpectedly smooth, grey flooring, facing an unbroken expanse of wall curving gently away into the distance.

After twenty minutes of slow walking that more than anything else resembled a drunken stagger, Kirk came upon a breach in the wall. The stone had fallen across the grey flooring as if some force had exploded outward, scattering gigantic hunks and blocks of wall as if they had been dried leaves. Kirk clambered slowly over the crumbled debris. On the other side he discovered a large, square enclosure, measuring about one hundred feet along each of its sides. The floor was covered with a brittle, grey carpet of dead moss and, except for that, the enclosure was totally empty. A feeling of puzzlement was born in Kirk's mind as he noted that there were no doors, windows, or stairs to lead further into the complex. It was a dead end.

Kirk shook his head as a dim mist seemed to float before his eyes, his surroundings suddenly becoming less distinct. He pressed his hand to his forehead and felt the burning flesh. Infection, he thought hazily, looking down at his throbbing arm with a touch of dread. It became still darker to his eyes, and his gaze was drawn upward. Then he realized it was not his sight that was dimming, it was the light itself -- night was descending on this sunless world.



It was pitch black, and no light of moon or stars disturbed the unrelieved darkness. Kirk lay in a corner of the deserted enclosure, shivering with a sudden chill. He was just drifting into a troubled sleep when he started bolt upright. A hideous scream tore the air, echoing and reechoing, heavy with the harsh sound of death. It cut off abruptly. Night here, as on Earth, brought out the predators, stalking their prey in a lightless world, killing and being killed in turn.

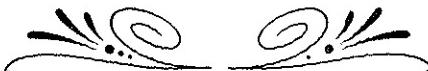
Kirk bowed his head, hiding it against his drawn up knees. It would be a long sleepless night waiting for the light to return.



Far above the cavern floor, the rocky ceiling slowly glowed into renewed life, as centuries-old timers automatically set into motion another cycle of day and night.

In the deserted enclosure, Kirk lay curled in a fetal position, a pitiful covering of dry moss piled around him as the only protection against the night chill. His exhausted, torn body had finally succumbed to sleep against his mind's sternest warnings and fears. He stirred, consciousness slowly returning, then lay unmoving for long minutes. Finally he tried levering himself up, but sank back immediately with a stifled gasp as blood-stiffened wounds pulled angrily in protest. The brief exertion made his torn flesh throb into renewed, burning life. He lay unmoving, gathering his resolve before carefully trying again. Somehow he managed to maneuver himself into a sitting position. He leaned back against the wall, totally exhausted with the effort. His world spun crazily, then slowly righted. With great precision he positioned one leg, then the other... and then pushed himself up using the wall's support. He only rose a couple of feet before his legs wobbled, then collapsed traitorously beneath him. He tried again, rising only a few inches this time, before falling back. His breath was coming in short gasps while his heart kept furious time.

Kirk leaned his head back against the cool surface of the wall, closing his eyes until his breathing slowed to normal. He took careful stock of himself: extreme weakness from loss of blood, high fever, almost certain infection. He grimaced as he peered beneath the stiffened bandages wrapped about his arm. The wound was reddened and badly swollen. He realized then that he wasn't going anywhere. As in a dream his gaze was drawn to the enclosing, pallid walls and he shivered. "Damned stupid place for a tomb," he mumbled to no one in particular.



He must have lost consciousness, for the next thing Kirk knew there was cool water offered at his thirst-cracked lips. He drank thirstily, hands grabbing automatically in panic as the flask was taken away. His eyes snapped open, and he found himself gazing into the worried face of his First Officer.

"What took you so long, Mr. Spock?" Kirk finally managed to whisper.

Spock's eyes cleared somewhat at the lightly spoken words. "Unavoidable, Captain. But I am here now." He gently lowered Kirk back onto the desiccated moss before searching the small pouch dangling from his belt. Drawing out a hypo, he injected its contents into Kirk's badly swollen right arm, directly above the makeshift bandages. "Antibiotics and a pain killer," he replied to the unvoiced question in his Captain's eyes.

Kirk nodded once, and relaxed back against the soft, yielding ground cover. Bone-melting relief flooded over him, not simply from the swift dulling of pain, but also from the solid reality of Spock's presence. He watched, feeling like a detached observer, as Spock carefully and methodically checked his injuries. The Vulcan's touch was gentle and very soothing.

"I do not wish to disturb these bandages, Captain," Spock finally said, a worried frown unknowingly creasing his brow, "as it would doubtless start the wounds bleeding again. You must wait for further attention until I can get you back to sickbay."

Kirk smiled shakily, laying a hand on Spock's arm. "I can wait, Spock. And should I even bother asking how you managed to find me?"



DECKER '86

Spock indicated his tricorder. "I simply deduced the existence of these underground passages, descended below the surface sensor-deflecting layer, and then followed the tricorder readings to you. This warren of tunnels made it time-consuming in pursuing a straight line, or I would have been here sooner."

A puzzled frown flickered momentarily over Kirk's face. "You're alone?"

"Not initially, Captain. The human crewmembers who accompanied me were affected by a debilitating emotional condition, which increased the longer we remained underground."

"You mean fear, don't you?" Kirk's words were deceptively soft, raising a red alert in Spock's mind.

"You were also affected." It was a statement, not a question from the Vulcan.

Kirk nodded mutely, his eyes huge in his face, as he looked unflinchingly into Spock's concerned dark eyes. "Anders was killed by it. He was so afraid that he lost control, ran straight into a chasm..." He shook his head as if to clear it of the painful memory. "But it was caused by something. I could hear it -- slithering -- in the corridors. And it left a trail." He shivered. "I never actually saw it."

"Fascinating! I also saw the trails in the passages, but did not make a correlation with the negative emotional response."

"You weren't affected?" Kirk asked, feeling almost resentful for a moment.

Spock shook his head. "Perhaps since Vulcans have strong mental shields against emotion... McCoy was somewhat upset by the fact."

"McCoy?" Kirk queried. "It must have been pretty bad for Bones to have turned back."

"He blamed himself for not being able to continue on with me. Before we parted he threatened me with various dire fates, all at his hands, if I did not bring you back safely."

Kirk managed a weak, lopsided grin. "Well, I can't let you face that, can I? Here, give me a hand up."

Spock wrapped a strong arm about Kirk's waist, half-lifting him to his feet. The injured man swayed, leaning gratefully against his friend's supportive strength. "Not ready to whip any tigers yet, Spock. But I just might manage a slow walk with your help."

"It already looks as if you have met your quota for tangling with a tiger, Captain. I take it you were the winner?" Spock tried to keep his voice even, but there was the thread of barely restrained worry under his weak attempt at humor.

Kirk understood, and tried to match his friend's attempt. "Barely. There are some fairly large, unfriendly creatures out there. Fortunately, it was a matter of phaser over brawn." He paused, and then looked quizzically at Spock. "I take it you do know the way out of here?"

Spock's eyebrow rose in quick response.

"Well, then, lead on, Mr. Spock."



They slowly followed the gentle curve of the wall, pacing themselves to Kirk's weakened condition. After a few minutes walking they came upon a narrow stairway carved from the wall's outer surface. Their eyes followed its path to the top where it ended abruptly.

"Spock?" Kirk's eyes were bright with a mixture of fever and curiosity. "I wonder what we could see from up there -- what's inside. It would only take a minute."

"Something hardened in Spock's expression, and he shook his head. "Later. At this moment, my only objective is getting you to Dr. McCoy as swiftly as possible."

At that moment, a hideous shriek, like the howl of a damned soul, cut into the beginnings of Kirk's reply. Whatever had voiced that cry was close, too close, as they warily eyed the cloaking wall of jungle. Silence hung heavy for a few heartbeats, then the fearful sound was repeated. It was rapidly moving closer.

"My last run-in with an inhabitant of this place didn't leave me in very good operating condition, Mr. Spock. I suggest we get the hell out of here." Kirk's face paled as he looked out over the ocean of foliage.

"A more defensible position?" Spock offered, already helping Kirk towards the nearby stairway. As a third cry shook the air, they were already on the narrow steps and climbing, Kirk moving up first. He found it necessary to stop every few steps, breathing heavily, fighting for oxygen, as waves of dizziness washed over him. Spock took up a protective stance to the rear, phaser drawn, gaze fixed intently on the jungle. The leaves and branches nearest them rustled, sending Spock into a firing stance. But nothing showed itself. The creatures of this world seemingly did not like to expose themselves to the bare, lifeless environment of the complex. Yet, Spock breathed easier when they reached the top, some forty feet from the jungle floor. Anything wishing to get to them would have to climb those narrow steps, then face a battle-ready Vulcan.

As Kirk stumbled up the last step, he folded slowly to his knees, arms clutching his torn flesh. Spock quickly knelt at his side, anxiety written clearly in every line of his body as he took in the white, sweat-beaded face and the traces of fresh blood seeping through the makeshift bandages. The hiss of the hypo cut through the labored sound of Kirk's gasping breaths.

"Thanks," Kirk finally managed to whisper, his gaze slowly clearing as the shot took effect. After a few minutes he had recovered enough to look around, his interest raised by the new surroundings. The wall on which they were perched was ten feet in width, and from their present secure height, they had a bird's eye view of the complex.

"It's really a maze," Kirk wondered, as he struggled to his feet with Spock's assistance.

"No, not a maze, Captain," the Vulcan replied. "There do not seem to be any interconnecting passages."

"Just a series of enclosures?" Kirk asked. He stiffened, pointing wordlessly to a gleaming whiteness peeking out of a nest of dried moss just below them.

Spock's eyebrows rose in typical fashion as he studied the skeleton. Apparently it had laid undisturbed since the creature's death. It had been big, its bones nearly the size of a Terran elephant. Spock located the skull, hollow eye sockets staring endlessly outward, teeth gleaming wickedly in a mirthless grin. It had not been a herbivore.

Spock moved on to the next enclosure, only to discover the skeletal remains of yet another beast lying scattered on a cold bed of black stone. Beyond that, there was another roofless room filled with dunes of purple sand. This diversity of environments was repeated in all the areas that could be observed.

Kirk broke the silence. "It wasn't a city." He caught the Vulcan's gaze with his own. "A zoo?"

"A logical conclusion. Each enclosure could have been a cage, apparently with different conditions provided for the various inhabitants."

Kirk smiled grimly. "Apparently the Preservers weren't into just collecting intelligent life forms. But why were they left here to die?" he mused, studying the whitened bones.

Whatever Spock was about to say died on his lips as Kirk swayed. Spock's arm slid easily about his waist, supporting the solid weight of his Captain against his chest. When Kirk's head rose from its temporary resting place on a blue clad shoulder, his eyes were unusually large and filled with a sudden fear at this reminder of his mortality.

"Sorry," Kirk whispered.

Spock's eyes mirrored Kirk's expression. "Illogical," was all the Vulcan managed to reply.

The human managed a weak smile, acknowledging the mild rebuke. "Come on, Spock, let's go home. We can debate the whys of this place later."



They decided to remain in the relative safety of the wall for as long as possible, moving steadily towards the cavern exit. Their progress was slow, hampered as it was by Kirk's steadily deteriorating condition. Spock's concern rose with each passing minute, for even with antibiotics Kirk's fever had risen -- was rising -- and, combined with his weakness from considerable blood loss, presented a dangerous situation.

Eventually coming across another exterior flight of stairs, they decided it was time to descend. Kirk stared at the narrow stairway with dismay. He felt Spock's worried gaze on him, but he refused to acknowledge his concern; it would only weaken his resolve. He took each step slowly, leaning heavily against the cool bulwark of the wall. Kirk was almost halfway down when his knees betrayed him, suddenly buckling. There were no handholds on the smooth surface, and nothing to check his fall. He was crumpling forward when hands of steel bit into his shoulders, yanking him back roughly to land against the wiry resiliency of his First Officer. Both men lay still for a long moment, recovering, then Spock edged downward a couple of steps, helping Kirk into a sitting position, and leaning him against his chest.

"I'm all right," Kirk tried to explain in a not-too-steady voice.

"Of course, Captain," Spock agreed, all the while continuing to hold Kirk protectively. "If you would permit me... ?"

Before Kirk could ask what it was he was permitting, Spock had risen with catlike grace to his feet, carefully lifting his Captain into his arms. Spock found he had to descend sideways, one slow, careful step at a time, finally reaching the jungle's floor without further incident. He paused, Vulcan senses extended and probing the hostile environment for any traces of danger.

"You can put me down now, Spock." Kirk's voice was pitched low, and there was a gentle note to it that made Spock turn to stare directly into wide-set hazel eyes. There was a slightly bemused smile on Kirk's expressive face. Spock flushed, and he hastily, if very carefully, complied with the request.

Kirk swayed slightly as he regained his feet, but managed to maintain his balance by keeping a steady hand on the Vulcan's arm. They continued their slow circumference of the Preservers' 'city' until they approached another natural break in the jungle. Spock indicated a newly hewn gash in one of the tree trunks guarding the trail mouth.

"Yours?" Kirk questioned.

The Vulcan nodded, leading the way into the fetid, oppressive vegetation. Unconsciously he began to quicken his pace, but with a guilty start checked his speed as a small protest escaped Kirk's lips.

There were rustlings, furtive movements on all sides, but no animal life showed itself except for an occasional bird or small arboreal creature hanging squirrel-like from the trees.

They had to stop and rest a number of times as Kirk's remaining store of strength was slowly depleted. To the human's increasingly clouded mind it seemed as if this entire world was malevolently intent on tripping him -- small roots or branches wriggled between his feet clutching at him with gnarled hands, and stones twisted traitorously beneath him. The only thing really keeping him going was Spock's everpresent support.

They slowly traversed the distance to the cavern wall without any mishap. Kirk breathed a silent thanks as the last vine was pushed from their path and they stood on sterile, grey flooring once more.

Spock eyed a tunnel mouth fifty feet above them. There was a path of sorts leading to the entrance, but it would be difficult for Kirk to manage in his present state. He studied his human charge with worried eyes. Kirk sat, leaning against the cliff wall, with eyes shut. Dark smudges of exhaustion showed clearly beneath each eye, and his face and torso was flushed and sweat-beaded. Spock knelt beside him, and Kirk's huge, fever bright eyes focused on his First Officer. He gathered the strength to smile from somewhere, the small gesture twisting at Spock's heart.

"Well, how are we doing?" Kirk asked quietly.

"The exit is just above us, Captain. After a brief rest we will attempt the climb."

"It'll take more than a brief rest, Spock," Kirk murmured as his eyes fluttered shut.

Spock quelled a surge of dismay. He would get Kirk out of this place if he had to carry him every step of the way. Settling down on guard, he contented himself with watching Kirk sleep.



After what seemed like only brief moments, Kirk heard his name called, as if from a great distance. Forcing his lead-weighted eyelids open, he focused on Spock's tightly controlled face. A warm hand was quickly removed from his shoulder.

"So soon?"

Spock simply nodded, dark eyes fixed on his companion. Kirk tried rising, but all he managed was to bring a new wave of pain coursing through his body. Spock's hand again gripped his shoulder, holding on until he was able to catch his breath.

"I think I need a little assistance, Science Officer," he tried to quip lightly, holding out his hand to be helped up. But the expression on Spock's face told him he was not very successful. He watched silently as Spock injected another hypo of painkiller into his arm. A small sigh of relief escaped him as a cool wave of non-feeling slid up his arm and down his burning torso. "Thanks," he said, looking up with grateful eyes.

The climb under normal circumstances would not have been difficult, but for an injured man it was a long, nightmarish journey. Kirk finally half-crawled, and was half-carried, to the tunnel's mouth. He collapsed onto his side and lay there panting as a red haze obscured his vision. Returning to reality, he found his head resting in his First Officer's lap, warm arms holding him. Kirk, even through his pain, smiled sadly, wondering why he had to be in danger or injured for Spock to drop his barriers and reach out to him. He wished it could be during the quiet, peaceful times as well. His fingers tightened over Spock's hand, and he was rewarded by a returned pressure.

"Rest, Jim," Spock whispered hoarsely.

Kirk shook his head slightly in negation. "No," he breathed, "let's move while I still can."

The passages were the same as he remembered -- hot, dank, and filled with fetid odors. But it was better now, even injured as he was, Kirk thought as he glanced at the narrow, alien face beside him. They walked slowly, Kirk more than half-supported by Spock's steady strength. Yet a pressure was building in the air about him, weighing him down, making it difficult to even draw a breath. The fear had returned.

"Spock," Kirk forced out the name between fever cracked lips. "Must... stop... just a minute."

Spock gazed at him wordlessly, before helping him to a narrow stone ledge on one side of the passage. After settling him as comfortably as possible, Spock placed the water flask to his lips, carefully giving him the last two swallows.

"Antibiotics not working?" Kirk questioned, as he gratefully leaned his aching head against cool rock.

"They should be effective against infection, unless..." Spock paused uncertainly.

"Unless it's not infection."

Spock could not answer, but Kirk read the expression in the troubled eyes with ease.

"Poison, in the fangs or claws," Kirk concluded calmly, as if the question were completely academic.

"Perhaps," Spock muttered, unwilling to return Kirk's intense gaze. "It would not seem to be one which is fatal. You were attacked almost twenty-four hours ago..."

"Just somewhat inconvenient?" Kirk concluded.

Spock's lips tightened whitely. "I cannot tell from my tricorder readings what is the precise cause of your fever. Dr. McCoy will diagnose and treat it..." His voice faded into silence when he realized that his audience of one had fallen asleep. He allowed Kirk a few minutes needed rest, enjoying the sensation of the fair head resting trustingly on his shoulder, before reluctantly awakening him. They had to go on.

Kirk woke slowly, too slowly Spock realized anxiously, and was confused by his surroundings. Then a look of comprehension stole over the human's openly vulnerable face. "I was having the strangest dream, Spock," Kirk said quietly, letting his friend help him to his feet. "I was on board the Enterprise, but I was alone, totally, absolutely alone. I was wandering aimlessly, walking down corridors, looking into rooms, all the while searching for you. And somehow I knew I would be there forever... like the Flying Dutchman... always looking and never finding." Spock could feel the shiver run through his Captain's body. "Thanks for coming for me in the real world, Spock," he said after a long pause, and he tightened his grasp about the slender waist. An unnamed warmth flushed through Spock and he unconsciously pressed closer to his friend.

They continued forward, Spock ever sure of his directions and the way out. But the upward path was growing nearly impossible for Kirk, the growing fear stealing the last of his strength. He pulled up short, momentarily frozen into immobility as he detected the first signs of recent habitation in the dank tunnels emerging from a side passage. Spock aimed the tricorder at the slime trail, studying the readings with great care.

"It was made within the last hour, Jim. But I cannot tell in which direction the creature was headed."

Kirk nodded mutely, eyes fixed on the noxious trace. "Come on. Let's get out of here." Spock could barely hear the words, they were spoken so softly.

His fears for the human steadily grew as he noted an increased breathing rate and heart action. Spock could sense his companion's fear vibrating like a physical thing between them. But he was still taken completely unawares when Kirk pulled up short, fingers biting painfully into his arm. "Jim?" Spock asked, worry breaking the thinly disguised surface calm.

The human's breath quickened even more and Spock feared that he would hyperventilate. "That way," Kirk said tightly, pointing in the direction leading to the surface. "... it's coming."

Spock's tricorder trilled as the Vulcan scanned the way ahead. "Yes, a life form... very large, but with readings unlike anything I've encountered before."

"We'd better get out of here," Kirk said shakily. He looked up into the controlled face of the Vulcan, and swallowed past the lump in his throat. "You don't feel it."

"Negative. I am experiencing a slight sensation of disquietude, but nothing of the magnitude you have described. Spock controlled the sudden illogical urge to apologize for not sharing Kirk's fear.

Slowly, they retraced their steps for about one hundred feet down the corridor, pausing by the mouth of the first intersecting tunnel. Spock aided his quickly weakening friend into this new passage, only to stop when Kirk suddenly pulled out of his grasp. The human stood, leaning heavily against the tunnel wall, knees ready to buckle beneath him.

"Jim, what... ?" Spock began, swallowing anxiously.

Kirk straightened slightly, jaw tightening with stubborn resolve. "No more running. Must face it. Face my fears." He turned to his companion, pleading silently for understanding.

For one insane moment, Spock had an almost irresistible urge to neckpinch the vulnerable human, to carry him away from this confrontation. Yet, he understood all too well that it was precisely those motivations and those needs which made Kirk the man he was. Instinctively Spock moved closer.

The long minutes ticked past. Nothing happened, no sound, no movement, just the evergrowing fear. Then Spock stiffened, staring up the tunnel where the soft, wet sound of something sounded faintly. Kirk heard the disgusting noise moments later, cutting off a despairing sob before it could escape his lips.

Both men waited, phasers gripped tightly, ready for whatever approached. Kirk suddenly stumbled backwards, falling to his knees, bile rising in his throat. Spock was at his side instantly and their eyes met.

"Jim..." Spock said hesitantly, "Perhaps I can help." Raising his hand, he paused a few inches from Kirk's face, the gesture itself a mute question. Slender fingers settled into the familiar contact points for the meld as he read his answer on Kirk's expressive features.

Kirk felt Spock's hand settle lightly on his face. Slowly the pressure increased, and it seemed as if each digit was burrowing through his skull, sending tap roots deep into his brain. He realized he was subconsciously fighting the meld. Making himself relax, Kirk let his trust well up like a spring, offering his inner self into his friend's safekeeping, and with that simple decision the discomfort faded and a familiar warm presence grew in his mind and in his thoughts. Slowly a fog, grey and thick, billowed into life, interposing a soft, protective wall between his essence and the outside world. Everything seemed very far away, distant. He could still feel the fear outside, beating



upon his newly erected barriers, clawing to get in. Even the pain which lanced through his body with each new breath, with each tiny movement, was somehow apart from him.

Movement in the dim light caught their attention, and together they turned to see a huge, grotesque shadow wavering upon the tunnel wall, slowly approaching. Some thing heaved into view, and Kirk shuddered with a crawling revulsion. The creature was huge, at least thirty feet in length. Its thick, shapeless body was a mottled blend of black and yellow. It reared its forward half up and, with what Kirk took to be the head, brushed the ceiling; then with a soft, wet sound it sank down again a yard or so beyond its previous position. So it slowly advanced into their line of sight.

Kirk sensed across the link a similar shrinking reaction of horror, as the monstrous, slug-like creature slithered forward. Once more it raised its eyeless head towards the ceiling, and Kirk steadied his phaser to fire at the thing which had caused Anders' death. Then, like broken fragments of mirror, the image of the ravaging monster shattered. Disbelievingly, Kirk saw that the underside end of the blind, seeking head held a small, half-moon mouth which scraped against the ceiling fungus with a slight abrasive sound. It was grazing, grazing on the pale growths like a huge cow. The phaser slowly sank earthwards, falling from curiously numb fingers.

There was nothing dangerous about the ungainly creature. Divorced from the mind-numbing fear, it was no longer an object of terror. He watched, fascinated, as it slowly and laboriously inched its way down the tunnel, finally disappearing into the waiting darkness.

"I was afraid... of that?" Kirk whispered to himself. Things about him suddenly grew dim as a fresh wave of vertigo pulled him down towards the beckoning dark. It was safe now to let go. The danger removed, his battered body finally demanded its due. As he sagged forward, his muscles losing the last store of their strength, strong arms closed about him. Dimly, with his last conscious thought, he was aware of being lifted, enfolded in warmth and safety. The nightmare was over. He was going home.



Kirk regained consciousness slowly, his only anchor to returning reality blessed absence of pain. Gradually, familiar sounds and scents began registering on his senses, and he realized where he was. Sickbay. He was back on board the Enterprise. His head felt as if it were packed with cotton, and his body weighted with lead, but he recognized this as the all-too-familiar side effects of McCoy's potions. For a long time he floated in comforting darkness, drifting gently on its tide.

Then, the sound of footsteps approached, coming to a stop by his side. He could sense someone standing quietly beside him, heard quiet breathing, and identified a familiar scent. Kirk waited patiently, keeping his eyes closed, and restrained a smile which tugged unmercifully at his lips.

"Jim, I know you're awake, so you might as well open your eyes."

Kirk gave free rein to his smile as he looked up into the determinedly scowling face of his Chief Medical Officer. "Glad to see you, too, Bones." His voice sounded weak, thready, even to his own ears. "And thanks," he added.

"For what?" The Doctor's voice gentled as he moved closer, leaning over his friend to better hear the softly spoken words.

Kirk studied his heavily bandaged chest and arm. "For putting me back together."

-- again," McCoy added.

Kirk's hand closed over McCoy's wrist, squeezing lightly. McCoy cleared his throat nervously, slightly embarrassed, yet pleased with the open show of affection. "Jim," he chided, "you're the only man I know who can regularly beam down to a perfectly harmless planet, and then be carried back aboard with multiple abrasions and lacerations, infection, and various other nasty bugs in your bloodstream."

"Just talent, I guess," Kirk whispered only half-jokingly.

"Just my luck." McCoy's gruff words were softened by a smile. He looked at Kirk critically before speaking again. "You feel up to a visitor?" Before his patient could reply, McCoy continued. "And if you have any compassion for your friendly family physician, you'll say yes. I'm tired of tripping over that Vulcan's big feet every time I turn around."

Kirk chuckled softly, enjoying the old game. "Is he here?"

"Where else?" the Doctor replied caustically. He turned on his heel, leaving the room only to reappear a moment later with the very cool and collected First Officer of the Enterprise in tow. "I'll be back in a few minutes, Jim. I have to run down to Bio for a last minute check on some test results. And you..." McCoy pointed a finger at Spock, "five minutes."

He left the Captain and First Officer staring at one another in silence. Spock cleared his throat nervously.. "The good Doctor informs me that you can be released from sickbay in three or four days."

Kirk shifted awkwardly in bed, not able to move easily with all the tightly bound bandages around his chest and stomach. "Good, never did like to overstay my welcome."

Spock continued, "Captain, we are still in standard orbit about Canaris 3, however, we have just received orders to proceed to Star Base 12. The last of the landing party has just beamed back aboard, and we can leave orbit at any time."

"Sorry to leave such a scientific find, Spock?"

"It is unfortunate that so much was left unexplored. However, when I submit my report, I am sure a full scientific expedition will be sent. There are years worth of excavation and study at this site. The underground complex alone is one of the wonders of the known galaxy."

Kirk nodded in agreement and then a frown knit his brow. "But why was everything built on so large a scale -- the cavern, the miles upon endless miles of corridors. Just for a zoo? Or was it designed for some larger purpose?"

"Unknown, Captain. Perhaps after further study a more complete hypothesis can be formed. The cavern appears to have been designed for housing a combined botanical and zoological collection. When the Preservers eventually abandoned this installation the vegetation ran wild, and those animals which eventually escaped their cages had an opportunity for survival within this environment. It would therefore seem a logical

conjecture that an ecological balance was achieved composed of those lifeforms who could adapt to this underground world."

There was a sudden abstracted, vulnerable air about Kirk that made Spock move closer with an instinctive need to comfort, to protect. "And what about that... thing we saw. And the fear." The last word was almost inaudible, even to Vulcan ears.

"Doubtless it was also one of the escaped exhibits which found a suitable environment within the miles of tunnels. And although physically repellent the creature was quite harmless. Its basically defenseless state is balanced by its strong emotional broadcast -- obviously a survival adaptation, to frighten away potential predators."

The bright hazel eyes turned dark, as he remembered those endless fearful hours in the dark.

The Vulcan read his friend's silence with practiced ease. "You faced your fear." There was a quiet pride in the deep voice.

Kirk looked up, startled. "But not without your help. Not a very good showing, was it?"

Spock shook his head gravely. "Captain, you are wrong. Emotions have never ruled you, and they did not do so here. It was your will that held against the fear in the dark. I simply stood by your side. That is my duty... and my free choice."

Kirk stared with huge eyes at the ramrod straight figure, noting the absolute certainty in the man's face. It was a little frightening to have that much belief placed in him. He forced his mouth open to speak, but at that moment Dr. McCoy bustled back into the room, the very model of the dictatorial physician.

"You," he jabbed a finger at Spock, "out. And you," he glared at Kirk, "go back to sleep. You need your rest."

"Your bedside manner is extraordinary, Doctor," Spock deadpanned. "I can only wonder how any of your patients survive convalescence."

"Out! You can come back to insult me later. Right now Jim needs some sleep." Any appeal to Spock regarding Kirk's wellbeing would have the desired effect from McCoy's viewpoint, and he watched the Vulcan head for the door.

"Come back later, Spock," Kirk called after him, stifling a yawn. Now that Bones had mentioned it, he was tired. "We'll talk then... maybe over a game of chess?" It was an old, familiar opening between the two of them.

Spock paused in the doorway. "Later, then, Captain," he promised. He quelled a sudden urge to wish Kirk 'sweet dreams', an illogical impulse at best. But with a suddenly light heart Spock headed for the Bridge, the image of Kirk's parting smile clear in his mind.



enemies

By: Jan Davies

I have enemies
Anyone in a position of envy can
Anyone in a position of power will
A Starship Captain is both.

Enemies at my back
With a desire for revenge
That will not die
For I've seen that death does not always
Put an end to such things

I have no close family
Never married...
No wife to hold hostage
My progeny, not mine in name...
No targets for my enemies.

And you, my friend...
Not making enemies of your own
But sharing mine
They will remember
You were always at my side;
Your gentle support
Tangible in the air.

Enemies haunt me...
Those who covet what is mine
Can rehabilitation colonies eradicate the hatred
Of Finney... of Janice Lester?
Can a planet truly hold Khan Singh?
People I have hurt in the line of duty
Countless others--
Blaming me for the deaths of loved ones--

I just pray they will not see
The secret in my heart.
That I would give my life for you
-- or any crewmember
Goes without saying
That I would give what's right...
-- for only you
Surely is my Achilles' heel.



STARDANCE

By: Ginger Dawson

Art: Andrea Kunz

"I don't know about this Jim. Letting Spock choose tonight's entertainment. We're supposed to have fun, remember? -- not be subjected to some boring lecture or some equally innocuous form of educational enlightenment. Hell, it is my birthday!"

Kirk smiled indulgently at his friend's complaining as they made their way through the crowded Denebian streets of the city, Y'Ta'vi towards the theater district.

"You'd be surprised to find Doctor, that Spock is actually an excellent choice of shore leave companions -- that is if one doesn't happen to be in the mood for some of the ah... more carnal delights to be found at the local houses of pleasure."

"Who said I'm not in the mood?!" McCoy interrupted.

Kirk chose to ignore him, continuing. "He actually enjoys going to different restaurants, sampling various intergalactic cuisine, going to concerts, art exhibits -- once, we even went to an antique auction. You should have seen him Bones. He was like a kid turned loose in a candy store! And you wouldn't believe some of the cryptic comments. I swear Bones, Spock has the dryest sense of humor I've ever come across."

"Sounds wonderful." Was the doctor's sardonic response.

Kirk stopped walking and glared at his companion with annoyance. "Look Bones, it's taken years to draw Spock out of that self-imposed Vulcan shell of his to the point where it isn't like pulling teeth to get him to even take shore leave. This outing was entirely his idea. Actually I had planned on treating you -- and myself of course -- to a night at Vadarian's Utopia..." (McCoy gasped but managed to hold his tongue. Vadarian's was reputed as being the finest of the finest in pleasure palaces. That he would be spending this evening with Spock and not there made him want to moan) "... but when Spock approached me saying he had arranged to get tickets for some performance tonight, and that he wanted us both to attend, well... I... I didn't have the heart to turn him down."

"I would have." McCoy muttered.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Never mind."

"Come on, Bones," Kirk said, sensing his friend's disappointment. "Vadarian's isn't going anywhere. And there will always be opportunities to visit pleasure palaces. But don't you realize -- despite the illogic and sentimentality -- Spock wants to celebrate your birthday with you."

McCoy stopped to consider the implications of that, and to his surprise found a smile coming to his lips. "Yeah." He said, almost to himself as the meaning hit home. "That ol' softy."

Kirk was smiling too. "He's come a long way, Bones."

McCoy nodded his agreement. "I guess we all have." He said meaningfully. "Let's go, better not keep Mr. Tooth Fairy waiting."



The Y'Nar'Vn was a modest yet dignified little theater, strangely out of step with some of the larger concert halls Kirk had become accustomed to attending with his first officer, but he kept that comparison to himself. Besides, whatever the Y'Nar'Vn lacked in size, it apparently more than made up for in quality, judging by the size of the crowd; not to mention some of the impressive figures he saw mixing and mingling about. Already, Kirk had spotted several groups of Vulcans, Denebians, several high brass in Starfleet dress uniform, and a diverse assortment of other humans and nonhumans.

Equally impressed, McCoy whistled and commented. "Some crowd. Maybe I will enjoy this evening after all. By the way Jim, just what kind of performance are we about to see anyway?"

Noting that the theater marquee, usually flashing in proud display the name of the current performing artist, was strangely dark, Kirk shrugged and replied. "I don't know Bones. When I asked him, Spock simply said, in that enigmatic way of his, that it would be a performance we'd find interesting."

"Interesting' eh? Uh oh." McCoy commented wryly.

"Now come on," the Captain admonished. "Take a look at this crowd. You don't get this kind of show of enthusiasm for simply being 'interesting'."

"I guess you're right." The doctor conceded. "Chalk another one up to Spock's predilection for understatement."

Both men smiled. Then, as he gazed about, McCoy observed. "Finding him in this crowd though, is going to be next to impossible."

"Excuse me sirs."

The captain and doctor turned simultaneously to find an elderly, dignified Edoan female garbed in a multicolored print of native design, regarding them intently.

"If you will follow me sirs, your table has been reserved and the third member of your party awaits you."

Kirk and McCoy exchanged relieved smiles. Following their guide through the still growing crowd McCoy commented to Kirk. "Hey Jim, is it me, or do you sense that there's some cloak-and-dagger secrecy going on around here?"

The captain smiled knowingly. "Leave it to Spock to take care of the smallest detail. While we're out here fretting about missing him, he's inside wondering what's keeping us. It is strange though that the marquee is dark. Although he could hardly have been responsible for that." Or could he? What was his first officer up to?

The Edoan silently escorted the pair to one of several inconspicuous side entrances -- the main front entrance was completely jammed with people and thoroughly inaccessible. Inside the theater the lighting was dim, and, like the exterior, subdued and dignified. The Y'Nar'Vn was a small theater, but in an intimate, not overcrowded way. Both captain and doctor were surprised, however, to find the room was already filled to capacity. In fact, at the designated areas, standing room crowds were equally filled to capacity.

"I don't understand." Said a puzzled McCoy. "Is this the first showing and the crowd outside already forming for a later performance?"

The Edoan smiled enigmatically. "No sir. There will only be one performance of Stardance this evening -- or for some time to come in this quadrant, I fear. Ah, here we are."

So intent were the two Starfleet officers in their confused speculation concerning the mystique encompassing them, that they were surprised to suddenly find themselves at their table -- and not just any table -- the best seat in the house, having an unequalled view of the stage. Spock rose to greet them.

"Captain. Doctor."

Taking their seats, McCoy hissed. "Alright Spock, spill it. 'Who' or 'what' is this Stardance and how did you manage to swing tickets -- not to mention the best tickets in the house -- when there are diplomats, bureaucrats and some other very important notables still outside who couldn't?!"

Spock regarded the doctor's annoyed curiosity with concealed amusement. He answered smoothly. "In answer to your first question Doctor, Stardance is precisely that -- a dance -- one I have not yet seen myself because it is a new piece only recently completed by T'Yord and..."

"T'Yord?!" Kirk exclaimed. "The T'Yord of Vulcan?!"

Even McCoy had heard of her. "You mean the null gravity dance artist?! She's performing? Here?! Tonight?! The doctor was almost sputtering in his excitement.

"Affirmative. Now gentlemen, I suggest you order your refreshments quickly. The performance will begin soon.

The ploy worked. His two companions were so involved ordering their drinks and excitedly comparing notes on what they each knew of the dancer, that Spock was spared having to answer a lot of, as yet, unasked questions.

Presently the lights began their slow descent into darkness, signalling that the performance was indeed about to begin. The background murmurings of the audience abruptly ceased. All was quiet. A tall, darkly robed Andorian appeared to regally take the center stage and announce in his quiet native tongue.

"Gentlebeings from across the galaxy. It is with great honor and much pleasure that the Y'Nar'Vn presents to you, T'Yord of Vulcan."

The audience broke into an excited applause. The hidden translators built into each of the tables worked flawlessly and unobtrusively, making it possible for all present to enjoy any performance without fear of a language barrier. The placement of the translators also explained the abundance of ample spacing. Despite the capacity crowd, the Y'Nar'Vn's seating design afforded a luxury of space Kirk had only encountered in telepathic societies, where preservation of personal space is a necessity and not just a luxury.

The stage was again empty as the entire auditorium descended into blackness. The distant stirrings of haunting music began, growing ever so slowly in volume. The audience's anticipation was a tangible thing. Then, into the void, musical and lightly accented with her native Vulcan, T'Yord's voice peeled out.

"We are all alike, in that we are each of us, different and unique. It is this that makes us one."

And then the stage exploded to life.

When the initial blinding flash of light and blaring crescendo subsided to comprehensible levels, there she was -- suspended in mid air, the spotlight and gold stage lighting absorbed and reflected off her costume in a scintillating display. She was a golden star turned nova, bursting forth with impassioned power. This was indeed, a star dancing. Every sweeping movement -- bold. Each impossible arc of body -- incisive. Incredible twists and thrusts -- flawless. Space was her partner, her playground, her domain. She danced.

Kirk watched, mesmerized, his own body involuntarily tensing, muscles bunching as if in physical synchrony with this mortal manifestation of cosmic glory.

The frenzied dance continued, soaring higher and higher in its impossible climb to unheard of reaches. Surely, Kirk thought, this frantic pace could not continue much longer. As if sensing his thought, T'Yord began to spin, faster and faster to an ever escalating crescendo of music until she was but a blinding gold blur. The lighting suddenly shifted and the gold became a blur of white silver. Then, in defiance of all laws of inertia and motion, T'Yord whirled to a dead stop in space.

For a heartbeat she hovered, no longer a blazing nova, but now a reincarnation of spun steel. She danced, muscles pulled impossibly taut, limbs extended at bizzare, abstract angles. She moved through space with a slow, utterly alien grace and precision that might have been mechanical were it not for her sheer beauty.

Spock nodded appreciatively, recognizing the basics of traditional Vulcan tokiel, artfully combined with the discipline of isometric exercise. The transition from unbridled passion to this masterful -- and highly intellectual -- display of controlled power was simply brilliant.

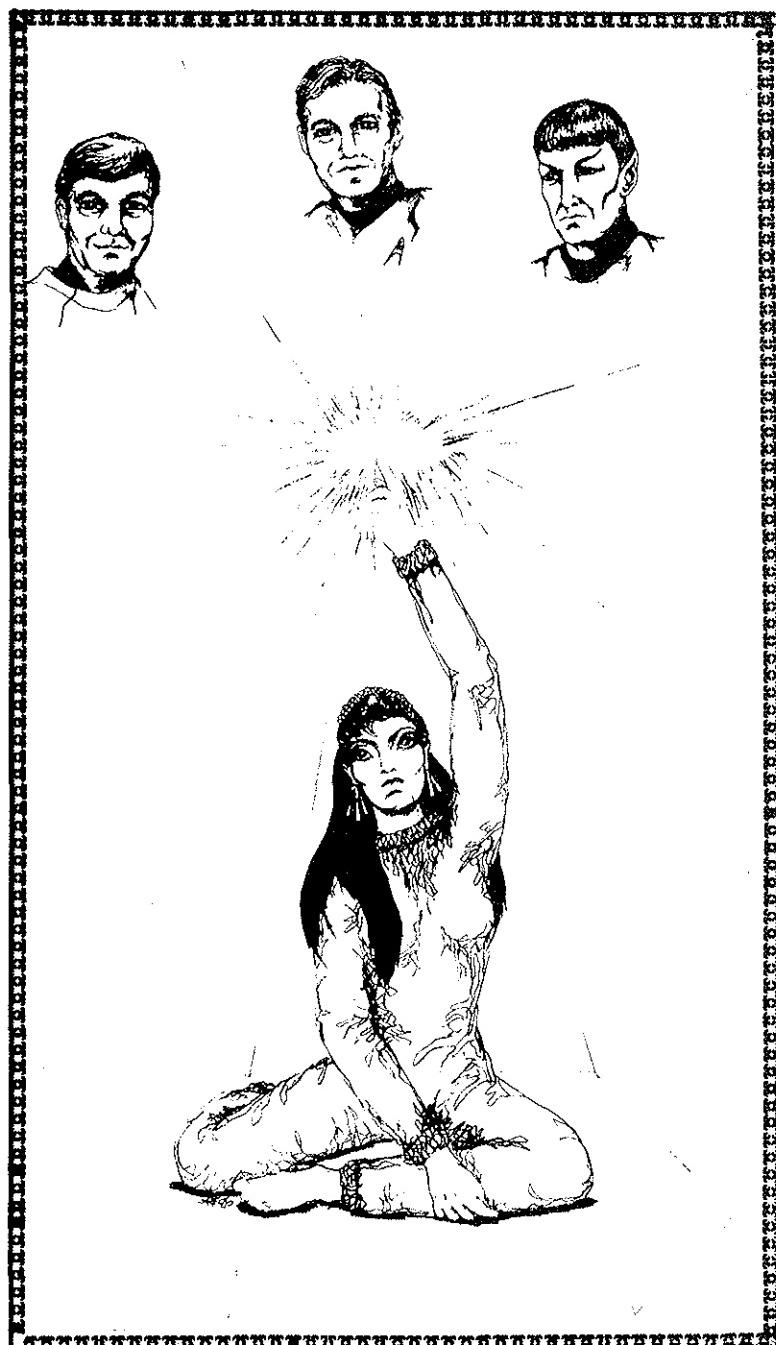
Spock's keen Vulcan eyes also noted that T'Yord's costume provided more to Stardance than mere visual aesthetics. The heavy jeweled brace and anklets were also highly sophisticated propulsion units. Suspended between the stage's concealed null gravity screens, they enabled T'Yord's freedom of movement. She danced. Spock watched, an eyebrow of disbelief on the rise as dancer began to slowly fold her lithe frame into a tight little ball -- a visual effect akin to viewing a slow implosion.

Music and lighting began yet a third shift, transforming the now impossibly spherical form into an unfurling creature of inhuman beauty. She danced a dance of heart-wrenching grace, her movements, slow and sweeping, emotional, yet eloquent. She was poignant poetry in motion. Multi-hued shades of blue bounced and refracted off the lissome form with each mobile utterance. Transfixed by the look of sheer and absolute joy radiating from T'Yord's face, McCoy found his throat constricting. The thought did not even enter his mind that this was a Vulcan, and Vulcans did not freely express such feelings. No. No one could dance this dance and not 'live' the joy of it.

Abruptly, a second flash of light blinded the audience. When sight was again possible, the stage had been transformed into a mad kaleidoscope of color, movement and music. Bold, powerful sweeps terminated in gentle swirls and abstract angles. Eerie, haunting strands of music followed an off-canted beat. This was Stardance -- unholy in its passion and power, mystifying in its thought and concept, poignant in its joyful affirmation of humanity.

It was a spectacle too beautiful to last, and so it ended. Arms extended in final benediction, like a feather on the wind, T'Yord drifted slowly down until, for the first time since Stardance began, solemnly bow. The performance was finished.

There was a moment of absolute silence, as if every being in the theater had forgotten to breathe; then the applause came. Thunderous applause which showed no signs of abating. Unshed tears stung Kirk's eyes. He did not need to look at his companions to know they had been similarly affected. McCoy alternated between



wiping at his eyes while trying to maintain his applause. Spock's expression was unusually intense, his eyes never wavering from the Vulcan on stage. He did not clap, but nodded his silent approval.

The applause continued. Shouts of 'bravo' and 'encore' rang out. T'Yord accepted her applause with the calm and poise of her race. Then solemnly bowing a final time, she stepped off the stage.

An eager crowd of well wishers surged forward. However, they hastily stepped aside as T'Yord purposefully strode to stand by the table of the Enterprise officers. Kirk and McCoy stopped clapping, not sure what to think of this unique honor. T'Yord's gaze locked with Spock's and, in unison, each raised their hands in formal Vulcan greeting. Then, to the surprise of the captain and doctor, they reached out to intricately clasp hands in what Kirk recognized as a ritual family embrace.

"Well cousin, what do you think?"

"I am pleased, T'Yord. Thank you."

Kirk and McCoy exclaimed simultaneously. "Cousin?!"

Both Vulcans turned to regard the humans. Ignoring his friends' outburst, Spock made introduced his companions. "T'Yord, this is Captain Kirk and Doctor McCoy."

T'Yord nodded to each. "I am honored to personally meet the other two thirds of Stardance."

"Other two thirds?" Kirk inquired, with curiosity.

Not having noticed the two humans' confusion, T'Yord addressed Spock. "The t'selurets you sent were quite accurate cousin. Initially, I had thought you exaggerated. However, now, having met them, I see you did not."

Translating for his friends' benefit Spock explained. "T'seluret is a composite representation, utilizing vignettes of music, color, poetry -- any and all the art forms to capture the 'essence' of a person, place or object."

Picking up the explanation, T'Yord continued. "Yes. Spock sent me such composites of each of the three of you and asked if I could combine them into a unified whole -- a dance. Upon studying the t'selurets and seeing how dissimilar they were, I at first thought the task impossible. Yet Spock has said it is the combined strength of your diversity which has made the Enterprise the finest ship in Starfleet."

Kirk turned to look at his first officer, with swelling pride and warmth glowing brightly in his hazel eyes. "You said that Spock?"

"I simply spoke the truth, Captain."

McCoy, who was just piecing together the implications of the t'seluret, said. "You mean that dance was..." He trailed off, as in his mind's eye he recalled the imagery of Stardance, a blur of powerful gold, serene silver and poignant blue. It was them! Kirk's powerful command image, Spock's logic and serenity, his own very human emotions captured in an eloquent dance of shifting blue color. Dumbfounded, McCoy looked from one Vulcan to another. T'Yord was speaking again.

"Unfortunately I am unable to visit longer, cousin. However, I must leave now if my ship is to return to the Beta VI system for my scheduled performance at the Ra'skeem Palace."

Kirk whistled his disbelief. "The Beta VI system?! That's on the other side of the quadrant!"

"Yes, I know." T'Yord replied. "Our ship's engines will be sorely strained, but it was the only way to bring you Stardance. I will not be in this sector again for many years to come. My schedule is extremely rigid."

"Wait a minute." Interrupted a perplexed McCoy. "You mean to say you traveled all that distance just to perform a dance... for us?!"

T'Yord gave him a classic Vulcan look. "Of course." She said as if explaining the obvious. "Stardance is Spock's gift to you."

"Mm... my... gift?" The doctor stammered.

"Indeed Doctor." Spock responded. "You have often commented that we 'mix about as well as matter and anti-matter' -- I believe I quote you accurately. I, however, disagree. And while I do not profess to fully understand the workings of our friendship myself, I do not question the bond we three share; it is real, and is a steady source of strength. Stardance represents the best of Human and Vulcan -- the best of what each of us has to offer the other, for as T'Yord said, 'We are one'."

"Spock... I... I..." McCoy was speechless.

Kirk was grinning from ear to ear. It wasn't often he got to see this cantankerous ol' friend humbled into speechlessness. T'Yord interrupted.

"Forgive me, but I must leave now. Cousin, I would like to ask a favor of you if I may."

"Ask it." Spock said.

"With your consent, I would like to use Stardance in my future performances."

Spock raised an appreciative bow, obviously pleased, then turned to McCoy. "Doctor?"

McCoy glanced at Spock and then T'Yord, obviously not understanding why the two Vulcans were looking at him expectantly. Kirk did, however, and leaned over to nudge his friend and whisper. "They need your permission Bones."

"My permission?!" McCoy couldn't help but sputter.

T'Yord explained. "Stardance is Spock's concept. I merely translated his ideas into dance movements. I therefore ask his permission to use what is primarily his."

"And I ask your permission Doctor," Spock continued, "because it has been given to you as a gift"

"But I... I mean... you... I mean... how can I..."

Laughing, Kirk chided the doctor. "Well tell them 'yes' or tell them 'no' Bones, but for heaven's sake, tell them something!"

Realizing the expectant Vulcans were still awaiting his reply, and that T'Yord was pressed for time, the doctor gathered himself and responded. "I... I would be honored -- very honored -- if you continued to perform Stardance, "T'Yord."

The Vulcan bowed gravely. "I thank you Doctor." Then in farewell, she saluted. "Peace and long life in Nome."

The Enterprise officers watched her disappear into the crowd. Turning to gaze intently at his first officer, Kirk was the first to speak. "Thank you Mr. Spock."

"My pleasure Captain."

His hazel eyes were bright with mischief as he added. "You know you never cease to amaze me my Vulcan friend."

"Indeed Captain. Why do you suppose that is?" Spock queried innocently.

"You big faker." The captain accused.

"Really Captain..." Spock began indignantly, but his friend cut him off.

"Er, um Mr. Spock... are there any other note worthy relatives of yours you might like to tell me about. I really should stop bumping into them unexpectedly like this with my mouth hanging open. Makes a very poor first impression don't you think?"

"I apologize Jim." Spock answered. "However I could not tell you about T'Yord and still maintain the necessary element of surprise."

"I guess not." Kirk agreed. "And boy! What a surprise! Eh Bones?"

Captain and first officer turned to look at the third and unusually quiet member of their party who was still staring off in the direction of the departed T'Yord.

"Bones?" Kirk prodded, when it seemed evident the good doctor might remain staring off into nothing for an unusually lengthy period of time.

Shaking his head, the doctor muttered, more to himself but half out loud. "Well I'll be..." Then pulling himself back to the present, McCoy found two sets of intent eyes on him. Addressing the Vulcan, McCoy suddenly realized that while he had no problem identifying the deep feelings of affection held for this friendly antagonist, the words needed to express them simply would not come.

"Spock... I... I don't know what to say. 'Thank you', of course, though it hardly seems adequate. Stardance was simply..." Again words failed him and he shook his head. "I just don't know what to say."

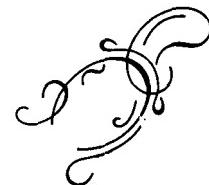
The Vulcan smiled at McCoy, his dark eyes portraying a touch of uncharacteristic warmth. "Ah, but fortunately Doctor I do." He reached for his glass and offering a toast said simply.

"Happy birthday."

BEGIN AGAIN

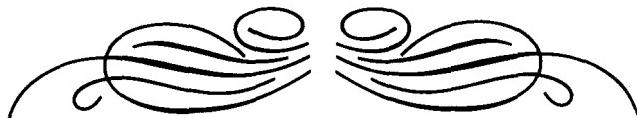
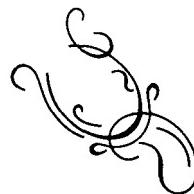
By: Su Fine

In the stillness
The blackness
The quiet part of my mind,
Faded pages of emotion
Flutter briefly, as a sign
Of feelings
I must not feel!
-- A realness, so unreal.



I AM lonely --
there is an
emptiness
That lingers

Am I always running?
Never stopping --
From a world that's full of pain
And joy,
And sorrow, anger --
They are fire in the rain.
Loneliness.
Emptiness.
If I cannot adjust
To this life
Then I must
Begin again.



And Promises to Keep

By: Lynn Syck & Laurel Ridener

Art: TACS

Clouds of incense hung in the hot, still air reminiscent of sandalwood and something else James Kirk could not put a name to.

The Hall of Warriors had not been used within memory. It was preserved as a remembrance of an earlier, bloodier time on Vulcan. In times of peace there was no necessity for a Warrior's Pledge and Vulcan had been at peace for a very long time.

Spock began the walk down the long passage lined on either side by tapestries depicting famous battles and those who waged them, protectors of all that Vulcan was and would become. Through transparent openings in the vaulted ceiling, red sunlight filtered down, creating pools of light on the ancient stone floor. At the end of the room on a raised dais, sat T'Pau, grandmother of Spock and matriarch of his family. To her right stood James Kirk.

T'Pau watched Spock closely, proud in spite of herself at the courage it took for him to request her permission for this ceremony. When Sarek had first approached her, T'Pau's immediate thought had been to refuse. Then it had occurred to her that Kirk could be the very key she needed to insure Spock's return to Vulcan once he was finished with that Starfleet nonsense; thus would their family name and honor remain on Vulcan. Given the Human's shorter lifespan, he would of necessity have to retire from Starfleet in a relatively short time. With the bond of the Pledge between them, it would only be logical for them to return to Vulcan where Spock could take his rightful place with the family hierarchy. And there would still be time for Spock to take a wife. Yes, it could all be made to work for the good of Vulcan quite nicely. To Sarek she had given only a very reluctant nod of her regal head.

At last, after what seemed an eternity, her rasping voice, barely more than a whisper, broke the eerie silence.

"Spock has requested the Tel'Shileen ceremony, Kirk. Does thee understand and agree?"

"Spock honors me with his request," Kirk replied with a slight bow.

"The Tel'Shileen is part of all we are, all we have been. It represents the highest commitment of friendship and loyalty. Because thou are not capable of mental abilities equal to Spock's, the level of the pledge shall be of a lesser degree."



Kirk thought she sounded insufferably smug about that last statement. He could not know how Spock had had to argue and cajole to get the matriarch to agree to even a superficial pledge.

Spock knew his Captain had far greater mental capabilities than even he was aware of. It would take training, probably years of it, but time was one thing they had a great deal of. That had been his rejoinder to T'Pau's first expressions of doubt and it held true. To all things there is a season, he thought, and what was planted here today would grow and mature to be reaped at some future time.

T'Pau's voice brought him back to the business at hand. "In ancient times, before the Reform, loyalty and friendship were occasionally the only bonds that kept our world from being torn apart. To a prince who proved his worth through his courage and goodness, his bravest warriors would pledge eternal loyalty to the death and beyond."

T'Pau lapsed into a silence that lasted so long Kirk thought she had changed her mind about the whole thing. Finally, she intoned, "James Kirk, does thee accept this pledge from Spock, son of Sarek? Does thee pledge in return all that thee has, all that thee are or will be?"

"I do accept," Kirk responded.

"Spock, son of Vulcan, does thee offer this pledge freely, swearing everlasting loyalty, swearing to defend James Kirk with thy life if need be, vowing to remain at his side until death and beyond?"

"I offer this pledge freely," Spock replied gravely, "in recognition of a friendship freely given and gratefully received."

T'Pau tried and failed to hide her surprise at the addition Spock had made to the standard reply. She nodded curtly and Spock and Kirk placed their hands on each other's face in the traditional meld position.

"My mind to thy mind," Spock said quietly.

"And mine to thine," echoed the Starship Captain with the too bright eyes.

The mind touch was light and delicate, the sensation of one mind blending with another gone before Kirk even recognized it for what it was. Yet there remained the faintest of links, one more of empathy than actual telepathic depth. Yet, the promise was there and Kirk was filled with an overwhelming sense of tranquility.

And then it was over, and within minutes, Kirk and Spock were transported from the ancient stone temple with its alien atmosphere back to the familiar environment of the Enterprise.



Over the next several weeks, whenever they could manage the time, Spock instructed Kirk in the finer points of using the link they shared, including how to shield it should he so desire.

Kirk found the exercises pleasant, if a little unnerving at first. Sharing one's mind was an unsettling experience at the least. Gradually, however, he became more used to it and began to look forward to expanding his abilities in this area.



The Enterprise was cleared for shore leave at the free port on Omega X. Kirk and McCoy joined the first party while Spock remained on board. They transported down with several other crewmen into the heart of the city.

"Not exactly a Garden of Eden," McCoy commented sourly, taking in the rundown buildings and filthy streets. Animals resembling small Terran horses ran loose in the streets, scavenging on whatever they could find.

"Are you sure you got the right place?" McCoy continued to complain while adroitly sidestepping something unrecognizable in his path.

"I never promised you paradise, Doctor, just shore leave. Besides, it was this or nothing."

"Nothing would have been a hell of a lot more sanitary," McCoy muttered under his breath.

"Our next mission promises to be a long one and I'm not sure when we'll get another chance for any kind of shore leave."

McCoy sighed hugely. "Yeah, well let's go get something to eat. And I get to pick the place," he added hastily. "At least food that doesn't come from a computer's warped imagination will be a welcome change -- if we don't get food poisoning."

After strolling up and down several streets lined with shops, the group found a small cafe and took a table. McCoy concentrated on brushing bits of whatever from the flat surface but Kirk seemed lost in thought. Suddenly, he stood up.

"Listen Bones, I saw something in one of those shops we passed that could have been Vulcan. I think I'll go take a quick look at it. If it is, I'll pick it up for Spock. Order something for me and I'll be back before it gets here."

He was gone before McCoy could protest, not that it would have done any good. The doctor settled back to wait.



Captain James Kirk tried to stand but paralyzing agony kept him pinned to the cold floor. Searing pain crept through his body, cell by cell, as the poison spread throughout his system.

Daystrom waited patiently for the interrogation drug to have its effect on this man he had hated for so long. The scientist grinned in vicious delight at finally exacting a revenge that had been years in coming.

The drug was one Daystrom had concocted himself. It was a slow-acting poison, excruciatingly painful and always fatal unless the antidote was administered before the drug reached the final stages.

Daystrom had watched with delighted interest, betting with his mercenaries that soon Kirk would scream and beg for a merciful death.

But stage after stage of the drug's progression had passed and Kirk neither screamed nor begged, which infuriated his captor. Daystrom knew a search would be instituted for the missing captain. Time was running out. The scientist glared at Kirk, hatred and anger filling the obsidian eyes.

Kirk choked back moans, refusing to give Daystrom the satisfaction of hearing him cry out. He attempted to focus his mind as Spock had tried to teach him, but even that control was fast slipping as the drug reached the last stages of cellular destruction. Daystrom had told him that an antidote administered soon enough could negate the effects. He had also boasted that at the final stage, nothing could prevent or repair the damage as the chemical ran its course. By that time, dying would only be a formality -- he would already be dead.

Kirk tried one last time to shield the link from his pain. If Spock became aware of his condition, he would come after him and Daystrom would delight in killing the Vulcan. Kirk accepted that there was no longer any hope of his leaving the room alive but he would not draw Spock here to die with him.

As another wave of agony spread through Kirk's body, he was grateful he had been adept enough of a student that he could at least shield his dying from Spock.

Daystrom was becoming uneasy, continually looking over his shoulder, expecting discovery. Breaking Kirk was taking far longer than he had anticipated. He was certain Kirk's Vulcan First Officer would be searching for him even now.

The Human was not supposed to hold out as long as he had and Daystrom was supposed be safely back on his ship by now. He could feel the icy fingers of death slipping up his spine to wrap themselves tightly around his neck. "Scream, damn you!" he shouted at Kirk drawing a gleaming rapier from his belt. "Plead and I will give you the antidote. Beg or you die!" he roared shoving the tip of his weapon against Kirk's neck, forcing the Captain's head back to face him. He was enraged to see that the human's eyes still held defiance and courage and a go-to-hell contempt that nothing could ever defeat.

Kirk felt the riptide of death begin to overtake him, flowing over him, drawing him away. A shuddering sigh escaped his body as he struggled to sit up, focusing on Daystrom's face. With a last small smile, he gasped, "You lose, Daystrom."

An inarticulate scream of rage erupted from the scientist as he plunged his blade into Kirk, again and yet again, until the gleaming metal was covered to the hilt in dripping red.

The human's eyes widened and his mouth formed a scream that turned into a strangled moan.

Daystrom's face twisted into a mockery of a smile. "Do I Kirk? I do not think so."

Kirk's hands grasped at the wounds in his gut and he turned on his side, trying feebly to move away from Daystrom. It was futile but instinctive; he would not give up.

The scientist's harsh laugh of contempt was the final thing he heard as the last of his strength gave way.



"Dammit, Spock, where the bloody hell is he?" McCoy demanded angrily. "It's like he disappeared into thin air!"

The Vulcan ignored the doctor and continued his rapid strides down the filthy dark street. The only light came filtering through the shuttered windows above them. Spock's senses were so much more acute than the doctor's that he had no trouble finding his way through the piles of decaying garbage. McCoy was hard-pressed to keep up. More than once he slipped and barely managed to keep from falling into the fetid slime that covered the alley.

Suddenly, Spock stopped and stood rigid, listening intently, eyes closed as he reached for the tenuous link he had formed with Kirk. 'Jim? Jim!' Only emptiness answered him, a silence deep and frightening.

McCoy felt his hopes dashed once more as the Vulcan opened his eyes and shook his head at the unasked question.

"Look, Spock, Jim's been late before and nothing terrible has happened. Maybe he just got side-tracked... you know..." McCoy could not finish the statement, the pretense sticking in his throat. There was absolutely no reason why Kirk had not returned unless he couldn't return, McCoy admitted to himself very frightened.

He was startled out of his reverie by the chirp of the communicator. Spock drew it out and flipped it open.

"Spock here."

For a moment, there was only silence, and then came Scott's trembling voice. "We... we've had word, Mr. Spock. The Captain..." Scott's voice faltered. "Ye better return to the ship, lad, right away."

Something in Scott's words raised the hackles on the back of McCoy's neck. The Engineer had never allowed himself to be that familiar in addressing the First Officer. McCoy did not want to accept what his instincts were screaming at him.

"Beam us aboard, Mr. Scott," was all Spock said.



The trip from the transporter to the bridge was accomplished in total silence; McCoy sharing the rising panic that Spock barely controlled.

Entering the bridge, McCoy looked quickly around. He had never seen Scott's face so pale and the rest of the crew seemed in shock.

The Engineer relinquished the command seat. He opened his mouth to report but closed it again, at a loss to say what he had to say.

Spock waited, staring impassively at Scott, who finally cleared his throat and began. "A short time ago, we received a delayed transmission from the planet." He stopped, swallowing hard.

Uhura, tears streaming down her cheeks, said softly, "I'll play it back for you, Mr. Spock."

Spock turned his eyes to the main viewscreen. The dark leering face that filled it was instantly recognizable and something in Spock trembled.

"Spock, my Vulcan traitor! By the time you receive this transmission, my men and I will be safely beyond your reach. But I'm leaving a memento behind, just for you."

The picture widened to include the crumpled, blood-soaked body of James Kirk.

"My God!" McCoy whispered. Spock seemed to have stopped breathing and he rose slowly from the command chair to stand rigid and frozen.

Daystrom walked the few steps to where Kirk lay and, using the toe of his boot, turned him face up. His body seemed to draw into a fetal position and his tunic was bright red with blood.

Daystrom spoke again, smug and satisfied. "Your Captain has been the subject of a little experiment, Spock. I wanted to see how my latest experimental drug works. I think you'll find the results... interesting shall we say."

Spock's attitude did not change in the least, but even in the recording Daystrom seemed to sense the fear deep within the Vulcan and play on it.

"It's a little drug I developed to secure information from reluctant informants. You can see how the body tries to draw in upon itself. That is one of the final stages of the drug. At this point..." he paused obviously enjoying himself, "... at this point, even the antidote can't save him."

Daystrom held a small vial in his gloved fist. "This antidote. I told him if he begged me, I would give it to him. And he did beg, Spock," Daystrom smiled evilly as he crushed the small vial in his gloved fist. He wiped the orange liquid on the side of his pant leg. "He screamed and pleaded but I didn't give it to him." The smile turned to insane laughter.

Suddenly the scientist sobered, leaning closer to the pickup, his eyes intense in a feral kind of madness. "He begged, Spock, sobbed and pleaded for his miserable life..."

"Like hell he did," Scott muttered over the recording.

"... laughed at him. Each time my knife pierced his miserable flesh, I laughed!"

McCoy turned his back, unable to bear looking at Kirk. He felt sick and angry and helpless.

"You will never find him, Spock, not even with all your Vulcan tricks. He's mine and he will remain here to become carrion for the vermin that inhabit this place. A fitting end for an interfering bastard." Daystrom's laugh echoed insanely in Spock's ears

long after the screen had gone dark. He did not hear Uhura's quiet weeping or Scott's oaths of damnation for Daystrom and all his ancestors and all his descendants.

"I am returning to the free port," Spock stated in cold, measured tones. "I want every available crewman to form search parties, units of four. We are going to find the Captain."

He was in the lift and gone before Scott could even get out an affirmative response.

McCoy seemed unable to move. He knew that he should go with Spock but somehow he could only see the image of Kirk's bloody, contorted body before him. He felt Scott put a hand on his shoulder.

"Go with him, Doctor. There's nae thing ya can do to help the Captain but ya can help Mr. Spock."

McCoy drew a deep breath, held it until his lungs burned, then exhaled slowly. He nodded and walked into the lift, never looking back.



Spock was in the main transporter room with Security Chief Abuto, issuing orders, organizing search grids. McCoy arrived in time to hear the Vulcan's final instructions.

"The search parties are to be armed with phasers, stun setting. Every building is to be searched thoroughly whether the residents wish it or not."

Lieutenant Commander Abuto nodded complete agreement. If he had been surprised by the First Officer's unprecedented order, he did not allow the emotion to reach his face.

"Spock," McCoy said from the doorway, "you can't do that! This is a free port... you don't have the authority!"

The Vulcan did not acknowledge the doctor's presence by so much as the lift of an eyebrow. "I will take the first party down," he continued. "As soon as the Captain is found, I am to be notified by communicator immediately. Emergency medical teams will be standing by, monitoring our communications." Spock looked pointedly at McCoy, then turned back to the Security Chief. "You have the coordinates, Chief Abuto. Commence beam-down procedures."

Abuto moved away to allow McCoy to talk with Spock. "Listen to me, Spock! If you forcibly search that free port, you will be in direct violation of a Federation treaty! At the very least, it's your career and it could mean prison! Think!"

Spock merely looked at him as if he were speaking a language the Vulcan did not understand.

McCoy tried one last time. "Spock, it doesn't matter now, don't you see? It's too late to help Jim... too late. He wouldn't want you destroying your life for no reason. Spock...!"

Spock raised his head and McCoy saw all the terrible pain and fear he was holding inside. "I will bring him home, Doctor. My life is mine to do with as I will. Daystrom has taken away..." He stopped abruptly as if on the brink of saying far more than he could bear to say. Turning away, he joined the team of security personnel already assembled on the transporter platform.

A shaken McCoy followed, replacing one of the men on the transporter pad. He knew there was still something more, something as yet unspoken.

"I did not feel him die, Doctor," Spock said softly, not looking at McCoy. "I did not feel him die..."



The sector of the city they searched was a warren of run-down buildings, small businesses, private dwellings, places that dealt with the darker side of life. Most of the residents reluctantly agreed to the search; the ones who did not had only to see several hands move toward phasers before they acceded as well.

McCoy kept the Vulcan under constant surveillance, knowing that with every moment that passed whatever slim hope they had for finding Kirk alive was fading -- what Daystrom's knife had not done to Kirk, the drug would. In point of fact, McCoy had already acknowledged deep within himself that the Captain was dead. Of course, knowing a fact and accepting the reality of it were two entirely different things. Until he actually saw the Captain's body, he could always hope. McCoy recognized that a kind of shock had taken hold of him, insulating his heart and mind from the pain that Kirk's death would cause him.

As they left yet another rundown building, McCoy looked up to see Abuto and two security men approaching with a slight, dirty, weasel-faced man firmly in tow.

"Mr. Spock, I think you should talk to this... man. He claims to have seen the Captain." Abuto's mahogany-brown face was unreadable.

Spock walked up to the man who ceased his useless struggles and began trying to shrink back from the towering Vulcan.

"Tell me," Spock ordered flatly.

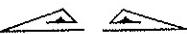
The man's dark eyes darted from side to side, looking for some avenue of escape. Finding none, he tried to brazen it out, attempting to draw himself up to eye-to-eye level with Spock. Failing that, he stuck his chin out in smug defiance. "For a price."

McCoy groaned inwardly. The fool could not know how very close Spock was to losing control.

The Vulcan reached out, grabbed the front of the man's filthy shirt and shook him. "Tell me -- now!" His voice communicated barely controlled fury.

The little man gulped twice, then began chattering, talking non-stop until he had told all of his story.

When he had finished, Spock released him. Neither he nor any of the other rescuers looked back as the little man crumpled to the ground, fainting out of sheer fright.



The squat, gray stone building looked like dozens of others in the city, windowless and one-story. The bolted door yielded easily to a phaser blast and then they were inside the single room. The salt-sweet smell of blood pervaded the air.

For one frozen, horrible moment, they stood staring at Kirk's bloody body. Then as one McCoy and Spock reached him. The doctor ran the mediscanner over him, not even daring to hope there would be a spark of life. Yet there it was -- faint, barely detectable -- beautiful!

McCoy glanced at Spock but the Vulcan's eyes were trained on Kirk's face. Spock lifted one hand to touch Kirk, but stopped, letting the hand fall to his side.

"Spock," McCoy said almost in wonder, "he's still alive!" The doctor plunged into the various treatments needed to nourish that spark of life, stabilize it somehow until they could transport Kirk back to the sanctuary of McCoy's sickbay.

Spock moved aside to allow McCoy room to work. He notified the ship to recall the search parties and told the anxious bridge crew that Kirk was alive, though gravely injured, and that they would be bringing him home as soon as feasible. All the while, the black Vulcan eyes echoed Kirk's pain and his own aching helplessness.

The minutes stretched into an eternity for the Vulcan First Officer. He was aware of every slight rise of Kirk's chest, every corresponding slightly faster fall, and the interminable wait for the next slow rise. Each shallow breath Kirk took, Spock fully expected to his last.

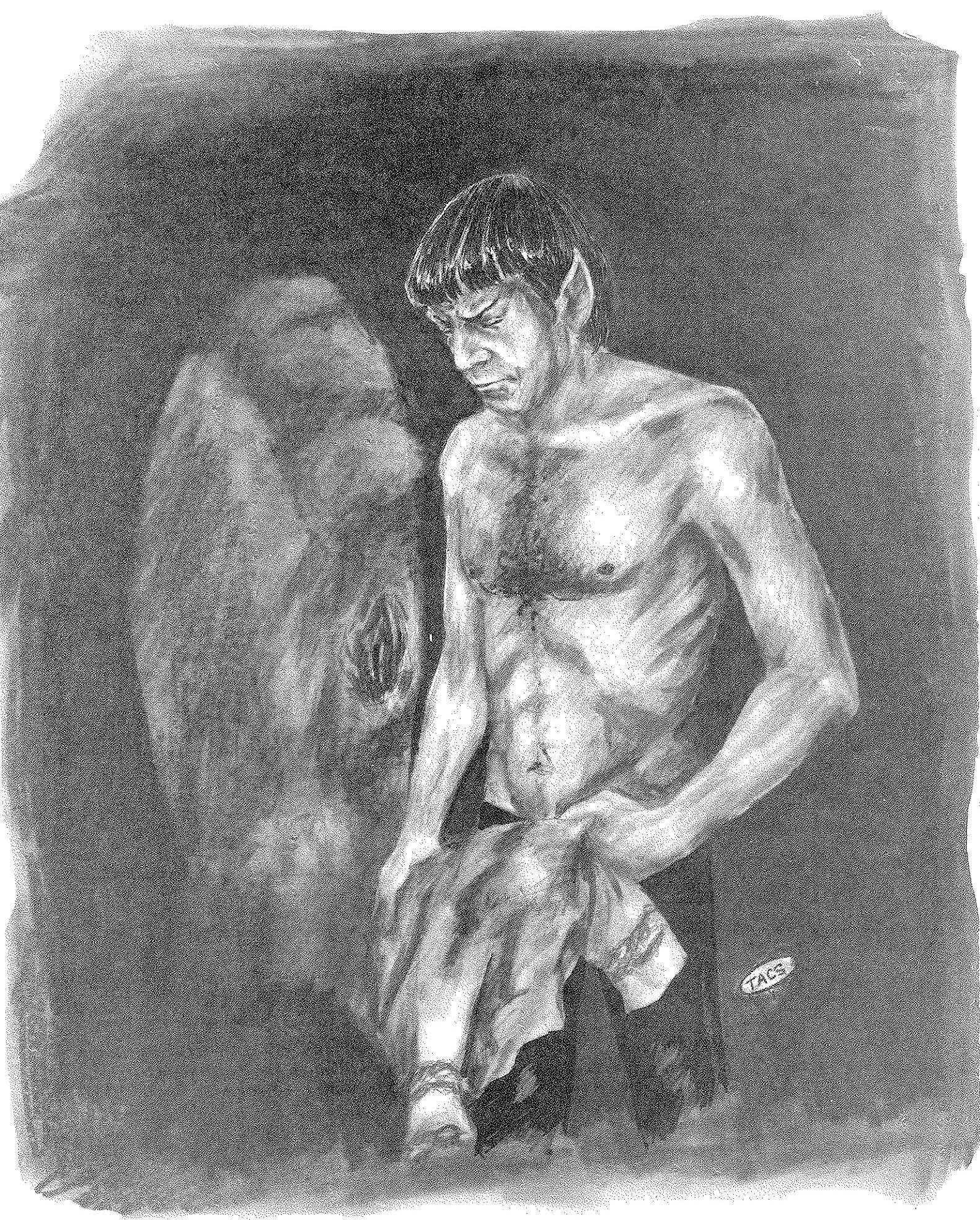
Spock turned inward, seeking the link of the Tel'Shileen. But James Kirk had learned his lessons well. The shielding was still there and Spock knew it to be deliberate. Kirk had chosen to die alone rather than risk drawing Spock into Daystrom's grasp. The act of selflessness accomplished what years of training could not. Spock felt the link deepen despite the block that stood between them like a wall. And he felt something else: the first faint stirrings of an anger so deep, so irrevocable that Spock trembled before its magnitude.

"Bastard!" McCoy swore, drawing Spock's attention back to the present reality. The doctor took out yet another hypo from his kit.

Spock, startled, looked at the readings on McCoy's mediscanner. "What... ?"

"He's not responding to the universal antidote, Spock. I don't know what's in that stuff but it won't respond to anything I've tried. We have to get him back to the ship, now!"

Spock reached for Kirk, easily gathering him into his arms as they waited for the transporter to take them. His Captain would not materialize on the hard transporter platform but safe in his arms -- or as safe as it lay within his limited power to keep him.



McCoy did not object. Kirk was so very close to death that perhaps the only thing that could hold him to life was Spock's will. The doctor had no doubt that Kirk sensed Spock's presence.

The anti-grav stretcher was waiting for them in the transporter room along with M'Benga, Chapel and the emergency medical team.

McCoy began issuing orders even before they stepped from the transporter platform. "Chris, take blood samples. Alert every lab on this ship to locate and define the nature of the poison and formulate an antidote! Absolute priority! M'Benga, set up duo-surgery; we have to close these wounds before he loses any more blood. He'll need every ounce of strength he has to fight that drug until we can find the antidote!"

McCoy turned to Spock. "Let them take him, Spock," he said gently, sensing the shock and horror the Vulcan was repressing.

Spock looked at him, his face as stoic as usual, but McCoy saw the pleading, unasked question in his eyes.

"All right, Spock. Take him to sickbay."



Spock finally relinquished Kirk to McCoy's care and removed himself to a corner of the room to stand watch. It was almost as if he felt that if he left Kirk, for even the briefest of moments, death would snatch him away.

The Vulcan glanced down at his hands and tunic covered with Kirk's blood and shivered, suddenly cold to the core of his being. What was happening to him? Where was his logic? His emotional control? He felt physically ill at what had been done to the Captain. Daystrom had brutally tortured Kirk but Spock felt every wound as keenly. The rage was growing in him, swelling against the tight boundaries of his logic and his training. He fought for control, calling into play every discipline he had been taught. A tingle of memory whispered in the back of Spock's mind but he had neither the time nor the concentration to devote to tracing and identifying it.

He closed his eyes briefly and tried to project all his strength to Kirk, but he could not get past the hatred that seethed in him. It was consuming him and he was powerless to stop it. It called to ancient warrior drives that spoke of vengeance and retribution, and he found that he had no desire to still that hatred. At last the elusive bit of memory became clear.

As his anger grew and burned, the turbulent rages seared away the last shred of his Vulcan control, turning the disciplines of five thousand years to ashes.

chi'Kir!



What seemed like hours later, McCoy approached Spock, his face gray with fatigue. There was something subliminally different about the Vulcan, something dark and distant and infinitely dangerous. But McCoy, wrapped in his own fears, did not see it. As he spoke to Spock, his blue eyes held no promise.

"I don't know, Spock. I've stabilized his vital signs, tried to prepare him for surgery. His voice threatened to break as he added, "That goddam butcher!"

Spock grasped his shoulder and McCoy felt the hand tremble and he knew Spock teetered on the edge of madness. If they lost the Captain, they would probably lose Spock as well.

"You can see him for a moment."

Spock took a deep, ragged breath and went to Kirk's bed. His eyes took in the readings on the panel above his head. They were frightening, hovering just above the level of death.

Kirk moaned softly and Spock touched his shoulder as if to calm him. The link was still closed as even in his pain and nearness to death Kirk sought to protect him. There was nothing Spock could do. He turned to leave.

"Spock..." It was more of a sigh than a word and only his Vulcan hearing enabled him to hear it.

Kirk looked at him through eyes glazed from the painkillers McCoy had administered.

"Jim, you will live." Somehow he had to make Kirk believe that.

"I... thought... Vulcans never... lie," came the whispered response.

"Jim..." Spock's voice caught as Kirk's eyes closed and the lines of agony relaxed. The Captain was unconscious.

Spock's hand reached for Kirk's face, for the link now denied him. The anger deep within him flamed anew and his hand stopped in mid-air as if some invisible force was keeping it there. Dropping his hand, Spock fled sickbay, his mind in chaos; somehow he must gather up the few remnants of logic and reason still left to him.



Spock sought the sanctuary of his quarters like a wounded animal gone to ground. The door closed behind him, shutting off the noises of the busy corridor; he collapsed against it, all strength suddenly drained from him.

In his mind, there was only one image: the tortured body of Jim Kirk. Even through Kirk's shielding, Spock could feel the agony he suffered. Every fiber of his being strained to reach out, to breach the link and share Kirk's pain, absorb it, take it away and allow the healing to begin. But to open his mind to that link would expose Kirk to the anger, the deep burning rage that exploded within him. He would exchange one kind of pain for another and very possibly kill the Captain in the act of trying to save his life.

His tunic was suddenly tacky against his hot skin. He pulled it off carefully and stared at it. It was literally soaked with Kirk's blood. He swallowed back waves of nausea. He had seen Kirk hurt before, at times to the point of death. But this -- this abomination was nearly more than his Vulcan will could accept or rationalize. Chi'Kir, the ancient fires of Vengeance and Retribution, burned at the very nucleus of his soul,

expanding outward, consuming everything in its path like an exploding nova. Should Kirk die, Daystrom's immediate and violent death must follow.

Carefully folding the tunic, Spock laid it next to the flickering firepot, allowing his hand to rest a moment on the stained blue shirt. Memories of different times with Kirk flashed through his mind. He jerked his hand back, forcing the memories to a quiet place in his subconscious, a place of gentleness and tranquility where they would be safe and free of the taint of his rising fury.

In the light of Vulcan's cool and dispassionate logic, some things were still considered sacred -- the blood of a Pledge-Mate among them. For now, he must keep the anger suppressed. Seeking a way to divert his thoughts, he turned his memory back to his request for the Warrior's Pledge...



... Spock had requested the privacy link to Vulcan without telling Kirk why he wanted it.

Sarek's face soon appeared on the viewscreen in his quarters.

"Father, a matter has arisen for which I seek your assistance."

"Proceed," came the even reply.

"I wish to request T'Pau's permission to make the Warrior's Pledge." A raised eyebrow on Sarek's face was the only response.

"Since the recent incident involving the Tholians, I have come to acknowledge to myself the importance of James Kirk in my life. I wish to formalize this importance in the eyes of my family, T'Pau, and all of Vulcan."

"But Kirk is human. How will he achieve the mental disciplines necessary to enable him to fulfill his part of the Pledge?"

"There already exists a link between us of sorts. It is composed of mutual respect, admiration, and total trust. The Captain is a remarkable student. As he progresses through the disciplines, I am certain that the link will deepen until it is equal to us both."

Sarek considered Spock's request. It was unprecedented in Vulcan history, but then Spock was also unprecedented in Vulcan history.

"And Kirk? What are his views on this matter?"

Spock shifted in his chair and hoped his father did not notice. "I have not approached him as yet. I thought first to secure your permission and T'Pau's."

Sarek frowned. "Then he does not know all that the Pledge entails, that if the link is severed by his death, your own would follow?"

"I will tell him all that is necessary for him to know," came the vague response.

Sarek felt some apprehension at the ease with which Spock dismissed the question. However, it was not his place to interfere in something which obviously meant so much to his son. He had seen the depth of friendship grow between Spock and his Captain. His son's request was not a complete surprise.

"I will approach T'Pau. I do not think she will refuse. You will inform the Captain?"

"I will have his answer when you contact me with T'Pau's decision."

"So be it," Sarek acceded. "Live long and prosper, my son."

"Peace and long life, Father."

After terminating the transmission, Spock had contacted Kirk in his quarters and asked to see him.

When Kirk admitted Spock, he sensed almost a hesitancy about his Vulcan friend.

"Come in, Spock. Something wrong?"

"No. At least..." He stopped abruptly, unsure how to begin, all his carefully prepared arguments suddenly flimsy and unequal to the moment.

Kirk waited patiently, knowing Spock would find the words soon enough.

"May I sit down?" Spock finally ventured.

"Oh... yes, of course. Please." They took deep, comfortable chairs facing each other.

Kirk watched Spock curiously, a strange sense of unease stealing over him. It was not often Spock requested an audience with him rather than simply dropping in, and then it usually concerned some very testy shipboard matters. That, combined with his apparent awkwardness was beginning to worry Kirk.

"Spock?" the Captain prodded gently.

"As you know, Captain, during the recent encounter with the Tholians, I began to admit to myself my respect and admiration for you and to accept that such emotions were not contrary to my Vulcan heritage but something to be integrated into my entire existence."

Kirk nodded, smiling slightly. He was pleased Spock could acknowledge all this, but he was beginning to wonder where it was all leading.

"Since that time, I have come to a decision. I have made a request of T'Pau, through my father, to make the Warrior's Pledge." He stopped, uncertainty again crossing his face.

"And you need leave time to return to Vulcan. Is that it?" Kirk prompted, relieved that that was the problem.

"Yes... but not entirely. I would like you to accompany me since it is to you that I will make the Pledge."

"To me?" Kirk responded surprised. "I don't..."

"I will attempt to explain. In Pre-Reform times, Vulcan was comprised of several small principalities, independently governed. Able-bodied males served as Warriors and were paid to defend their various territories against invasion by others. In some few cases, however, a special tie would develop between the ruling Prince and his Warrior leader. Legend has it that the gods predestined two such souls to meet and when they did, a link was formed. As the link deepened, one or the other would request a formal ceremony. During that ceremony, each would pledge fealty to the other for all of life... and beyond."

"Beyond?" Kirk managed.

"In the event of a Pledge-Mate's death at the hands of an enemy, chi-Kir would be invoked. It was a kind of frenzy which impelled the survivor to seek and destroy the murderers. In the ancient beliefs, this would insure the continuance of the tribe, or the principality through the destruction of the common enemy."

Spock studied Kirk's face for a moment and then made the connection for the silent human. "I am Warrior to your Prince."

Kirk was stunned and momentarily speechless. A thousand questions and more objections flashed through his mind but something in Spock's eyes stopped him from voicing most of them. One irrefutable fact must be faced however.

"Spock, I'm honored and flattered that you would want to do this, but I'm not Vulcan. I don't have your telepathic abilities. The Pledge would be one-sided. You couldn't exist like that," he gently argued.

"I have already taught you some disciplines and you are a remarkable study. And we have been linked on more than one occasion."

"Usually to save my backside," Kirk interposed ruefully.

Spock acknowledged the truth of that with the slightest of smiles and continued. "In those melds, I saw nothing that would negate the Pledge. I can teach you what you need to know and in time your telepathic levels will be close to mine. What is important is that the Pledge be made now."

"I see. And what about Sarek and T'Pau? How are they going to feel about this?"

As it turned out Sarek had agreed as had T'Pau though she had forbidden the full pledge citing Kirk's lack of telepathic abilities as the reason.

The irony of that decision brought Spock back to the painfilled present.



McCoy left sickbay and returned to his office to collapse in a chair. He did not hear Scott come in and the Engineer had to call his name twice before McCoy looked up.

"Oh. Scotty." "The Captain? Is he... ?" "He's still alive, no thanks to that bloody bastard!" McCoy answered bitterly.

"He'll recover then?"

"I wish I knew. We found the antidote and administered it but it hasn't started working yet. As soon as he's more stable, we'll have to operate."

Something had been nagging at McCoy throughout the entire conversation and he suddenly realized what it was.

"Where's Spock? Have you seen him?"

"Nae, not since you returned with the Captain," Scott answered with a shake of his head.

"Ordinarily you couldn't keep him away from Jim with a forcefield," murmured McCoy.

He was reaching for the com, when M'Benga appeared in the office doorway.

"You'd better come, doctor, it's the Captain."

McCoy's heart was slamming by the time he reached Kirk's side. The life signs on the body function panel had dropped almost to zero. The Captain was slipping away from them. McCoy could not operate with Kirk so weakened and unstable. Somehow, he had to be strengthened but it did not lay within McCoy's power to give him that strength. It did lay within Spock's.

The doctor went to the wall com unit. "McCoy to Spock!"

"Spock here."

"I need you in sickbay, Spock, now." There was only silence. McCoy frowned. "Spock? I said I need you here."

"I am unable to leave my quarters, Doctor. If you wish to speak with me, I must request that you come here. Spock out."

McCoy's mouth hung open, too stunned to launch the tirade of questions at Spock. Besides, Spock was no longer there to answer. He did not want to leave Kirk but there seemed to be no other choice.

By the time he reached Spock's cabin, he was seething. At his signal, the door opened and Spock rose to come and meet him.

"Spock, what in hell is going on? Jim's dying and you're holed up here like some damn..." McCoy froze, his last words unspoken. The Vulcan who stood before him was not his friend and First Officer of the Enterprise, but a stranger. McCoy instantly sensed the barely leashed fury within the Vulcan and the atmosphere in the darkened cabin was electric with suppressed emotion.

McCoy controlled the impulse to flee. He had to convince Spock to help Kirk. That was all that mattered now.

The doctor sat carefully on the chair next to Spock's bunk, his eyes never leaving the Vulcan's face. "I've done all I can, Spock. He's too weak for surgery and without it he'll die for sure. There's so much internal damage..." His voice trailed off.

"Spock," he looked up hopefully, "what about a healing trance? Just enough to raise his vital signs to a more acceptable level, minimize the shock."

The Vulcan turned his back and did not answer.

McCoy could not believe what he was seeing. "Spock, it may be Jim's only chance!" he said, rising from the chair.

"I cannot," came the grim reply.

McCoy grabbed his shoulders and turned him around. "What do you mean you can't?"

Before McCoy's reflexes could even warn him of the danger, Spock had grabbed the offending hand and held it in an iron grip, bringing tears to McCoy's eyes. Spock stared at him, not loosening his hold on McCoy's wrist. "I cannot open my mind to the Captain's to induce the trance. To do so would insure his immediate death," he explained in a savage whisper.

Slowly, Spock opened his hand, releasing McCoy. The doctor backed off a step, unconsciously rubbing the throbbing wrist with his other hand. "What are you saying? This is Jim we're talking about."

Spock looked past him, the anger in his eyes momentarily replaced by deep and rending grief.

"Jim and I are linked in a way few could ever hope to attain. That link is a two-edged sword, Doctor. It provides us with benefits of the deepest kind of friendship. It also carries with it responsibilities that cannot be ignored or forgotten." He stopped and met McCoy's eyes.

"Daystrom's torture wounded more than the Captain's body. It threatened the Warrior Pledge that I made to him. In ancient times, the Pledge meant the survival of the tribe -- defense, protection, life itself. When the Pledge was threatened, so was the basic survival of the tribal unit. The threat must be removed at all costs. These ancient drives are still within the Vulcan people, though controlled. It takes more than a minor attack to awaken these drives -- it must be an attack of such savagery that it threatens the very fabric of the link. Today James Kirk suffered such an attack and the ancient rages now burn within me."

"I still don't understand what all this has to do with your not helping Jim."

Spock closed his eyes, visibly fighting for control while he attempted to explain. "Within me now there is only anger and the compelling need to avenge the Captain. To kill, Doctor. This is a negative energy force. To allow it to touch Jim's positive life force in its weakened state would mean instant and total destruction of his being. I have no way to control this. Were I to open a link for whatever reason, the anger would span the link and destroy the Captain."

McCoy stared at Spock a full minute before speaking. "Damn," he swore, turning wearily to the door. "I don't pretend to understand Spock, but I'll accept what you've told me. I have no choice. I have to get back to sickbay."

Spock stood looking at the closed door for several long moments, thinking of what he had told McCoy -- and all that he had not told him.



Leonard McCoy felt dread pull at him as he entered sickbay. M'Benga was still at Kirk's side and the readings had not changed.

"I'll stay with him," McCoy said softly, moving to the chair beside the Captain's bed.

M'Benga left the small room, knowing there was nothing more to be done by any of them until Kirk was strong enough to undergo surgery.

McCoy reached out to take Kirk's hand in his own. It was so very cold and the doctor felt the same coldness grip his heart.

"Jim, you've got to listen to me," he began softly, hardly knowing what he was going to say, only knowing it was important to try to reach Kirk. "It's up to you now. You've never quit on me before, and we've been through some tough ones. You can't quit on me now. You've got to fight, for all of us!"

Minutes stretched into hours but McCoy refused to leave what had become to him a personal battleground. A war was being waged with Kirk's life hanging in the balance. He would stay until there was no more reason to stay.

He had closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair when he felt Kirk's fingers weakly grasp his hand. At once, he was on his feet, studying the life-support indicators.

"M'Benga!" he called. The black doctor's face broke into a wide grin as he entered the room and looked at the readings.

"There's a definite improvement!" he said, slapping McCoy on the back.

McCoy could only nod weakly. "Let's get him to surgery. It's his only chance now."

M'Benga summoned the nurses and they took Kirk into the adjoining operating room. McCoy went to the wall unit and called Spock to give him the news.

"I'll let you know when we're through, Spock."

"That is acceptable," the Vulcan replied in clipped, precise tones.



When no word had come from McCoy after more than an hour, Spock returned to sickbay. He watched through the operating theatre window as McCoy, M'Benga and several nurses worked on Kirk. Although Spock's time-sense functioned perfectly, possibly even heightened by the initial effects of chi'Kir, it seemed as if each minute

lasted longer than the last until Spock felt certain that time had slowed to a complete standstill. He found his hand pressed against the glass as if he could somehow reach Kirk and hold him to life, cradle that fragile spark until time resumed its natural flow and Kirk grew strong enough to survive on his own.

Suddenly, McCoy's hand froze in mid-air and at the same instant, the high wail of the cardiac monitor alarms reached Spock through the window. He watched, terror gripping his entire being, as the surgical team fought for Kirk's life. He felt the link being torn from his mind, ripped from his soul with a gut-wrenching cruelty. Reality shattered around him as he saw McCoy look up at him with total hopelessness written in every line of his face.

"No!" Spock gasped as the last slender threads of the link snapped, the white searing agony sending his mind reeling, plunging for the inner depths of death to join his Pledge-Mate.

"No!" he said again through clenched teeth. "I must not!" He forcibly stopped the inward plunge, bringing his consciousness back to the surface reality of pain and chilling emptiness. There was a gaping wound where the link had been, and the corridors of his mind that had once been alive with Kirk's vitality and warmth were now cold and empty, mockingly echoing his aloneness.

"No," he whispered brokenly a third time. Later, after he had dealt with Daystrom, there would be time to mourn his loss and give himself over to death as well. The essence of the link would still be intact and he would have no difficulty in being drawn to join the Captain. For now, he must concentrate on chi'Kir. Fulfillment of its demands for revenge would necessitate his staying alive. He must find Daystrom without delay.

Spock closed off the trembling remnants of the shattered link behind a wall forged of bitterness and grief. He would continuously reinforce that wall until he was ready to follow Kirk into death.

Spock forced himself to turn away from the window. He had never been so alone in his life. It was worse than the loneliness he had known before meeting Kirk; then he had not known the peace and contentment to be had from such a friendship. Now he did, and the loss was all the more savage because of that knowledge.



Within minutes of leaving sickbay, Spock exchanged his uniform for civilian clothes and left the ship.

He chose as his beam-down point the building where they had found Kirk. He paused at the open door and closed his eyes briefly, trying to steel himself to reenter. After a moment, he straightened his shoulders and went in.

The windowless room was bare except for some empty crates scattered about. He examined each one but they gave him no clue to where Daystrom might have gone. The room was musty, with rivulets of moisture seeping down the moss-covered walls.

Spock turned to leave when his eyes fell upon the rustbrown stains. He knelt and touched the spot where Kirk had lain. It was as if it were happening all over again. He saw the blood, bright red and wet. And the rage grew bright again as well. Torrents of

anger coursed through him and he knew that if Daystrom were under his hands at this very moment, he would take great pleasure in killing him. The thought sickened him and consumed him at once. Five thousand years of peace were disappearing as night gives way to day -- slowly, inexorably, unstoppably.

Spock stood and rubbed his temples. The effort to keep the severed link barricaded would expend a great deal of energy. He knew that if he once opened his mind to the great void caused by Kirk's violent death, he would follow the delicate essence of the strand that still linked them, follow it into and beyond death, to whatever awaited them. Once Daystrom was dealt with, he would welcome it.

But not now.

Spock turned his back on the room and on all the years of his life up to this point, and took the first steps on the road that must eventually lead him to Daystrom, retribution, and the Captain.



Leonard McCoy lay stretched out on a cot in his office, trying to rest. Tension, loss, fatigue, elation, worry -- all combined to send his nerves singing. He would have no rest this night. Kirk's condition was still critical but McCoy felt he was stable enough to be left for a few minutes with the night nurse to monitor him.

The doctor covered his eyes with his arm, trying to shut out both the feeble light and the turmoil of his thoughts.

It had been so very, very close. Kirk's life had hung in such a precarious balance during the surgery -- and did even now -- that he had been only a heartbeat away from death. McCoy shuddered at the memory of those terrible minutes when death seemed to have won, Kirk's gallant heart losing the fight for life. He had glanced up to see Spock through the window, his own face mirroring the total devastation the Vulcan was unable to hide.

Something outside of McCoy had taken over then and he forgot Spock and everything else but his battle with death for the possession of James Kirk.

McCoy heard the office door open slightly as if someone were trying not to disturb him. With a sigh of relief, he sat up and saw that it was Scotty.

"Come on in, Scotty."

"I'm sorry, Leonard. I dinna mean to wake ya."

"You didn't. And I'm glad you're here. The walls were closing in on me. Sit down."

The Engineer took the offered chair and slumped tiredly. "Spock has left the ship, left me in command."

McCoy snapped to immediate attention, all fatigue slipping away as alarm klaxons went off in his mind. Bits and pieces of what Spock had told him filtered through his exhaustion: Warrior's Pledge, retribution, death. "Left the ship?" he repeated hoarsely. "What are you saying?"

"All I know is he came to see me in Engineering and said he was turning command over to me. Then he left before I could ask him what 'twas all about. He was dressed all in black... and... frightening he was."

"He's gone to find Daystrom! I'd like to be with Spock when he catches up with that murdering son of a..." His fist hit the desk.

"Revenge? I'd hardly think it of a Vulcan," Scott said surprised.

McCoy shook his head. "Has something to do with that pledge ceremony on Vulcan. But he wouldn't leave until he knew Jim was all right. I don't understand..." The doctor's voice trailed off as Spock's tormented face at the operating room window flashed through his mind. He buried his face in his hands.

"My God, Scotty, he thinks Jim is dead! That's why he left -- he thinks the Captain is dead! We've got to find him, tell him he's wrong!"

Scott shook his head, uneasy at the desperation in McCoy's voice. "That 'twill be difficult. Spock turned over his communicator to me when he left and there must be a thousand Vulcans and such in that free port."

McCoy climbed tiredly to his feet. "You know what Jim would say, Scotty -- we have to try."

"Aye, Doctor, that we do." Scott braced himself to ask the question he had been avoiding. "The Captain?"

McCoy met his eyes and saw the fear that must be showing in his own. "I wish I knew what to tell you, Scotty. He's stable but... I'd better go check on him."

"And I'll get started on trying to find Mr. Spock. I'll be on the bridge if there's any change."

McCoy nodded and left his office to return to his vigil at Kirk's side.



Rain began to fall in the early hours of the next day. Spock did not sleep but went from one shabby building to the next, asking lots of questions but getting no answers.

He was looking for the disreputable informant who had earlier led him to Kirk. It was the only lead he had.

The cold rain trickled down his back and plastered his hair to his head. He did not notice. The streets were unlit and largely deserted. Ahead a few hundred feet, he spotted yellow squares of light that indicated habitation. Perhaps there he would find his answers.

Spock was headed for the building when four figures materialized out of the shadows in front of him. He could not see them clearly but as they moved to form a half-circle in front of him, he knew they boded no good.

"What do you want of me?" he demanded.

They did not answer but advanced toward him, phasers suddenly in evidence in every hand.

Spock began to step back when, without warning, his foot slipped on the slimy cobblestone street and he fell heavily on his left side. The snap of the breaking bone had little time to register before the blow to the side of his head took away everything.

McCoy sat by Kirk's bed, rubbing his eyes. They felt like he had spent the night in the middle of a Vulcan sandstorm. Lord save me from anything -- or anyone -- Vulcan, he thought. Maybe a cup of coffee. No, his stomach turned decidedly queasy at the thought. He was so full of coffee now he felt like he sloshed when he walked.

The doctor glanced at the panel to see the signs inching higher as the hours passed. Kirk was far from out of danger but at least he was not slipping.

McCoy felt old. He wondered how many more of these bedside vigils he could take. There was far too much of Leonard McCoy invested in this one fragile being called James Kirk. For his own self-protection, McCoy knew he should leave, transfer out, go back to research. At least in a lab there was no danger of having his heart broken. It seemed that every time he allowed himself to become close to someone, to care, to love, they were taken from him.

He realized too, not for the first time, that he and Spock had more in common than the Vulcan would ever admit. They had both allowed James Kirk into their hearts and as a result were vulnerable to a kind of pain that could be unbearable.

McCoy wanted to walk away and never look back but it was too late now. Even if he left, he would never be free of caring and concern for Kirk.

The Captain began to toss and moan. The words were unintelligible but McCoy felt sure Kirk was reliving what Daystrom had done to him.

"Easy, Jim," he soothed, touching his shoulder. Kirk recoiled violently from the touch. Before McCoy could stop him, Kirk rolled over and out of the bed, managing a wobbly defensive crouch in the opposite corner. Broken IVs hung from his arms and his eyes were wide with terror and what McCoy recognized as to-the-death defiance. Kirk did not know where he was.

McCoy moved to place himself directly in the Captain's line of vision, waving back the nurses who had rushed into the room when the monitors had gone off.

"Jim, look at me... it's Bones. You're all right... you're safe in sickbay, on the Enterprise. Jim. Please, look at me." He kept his voice calm and hoped his steady words of reassurance would reach Kirk in the nightmare that gripped his mind.

The crazed hazel eyes turned toward him, recognition finally beginning to fill them.

"Bones?" he whispered. "No... a trick..." he muttered, shaking his head. In the turmoil of his mind, it was only another torture devised by Daystrom. He would not give in to it, would not allow the bastard the satisfaction. But oh, how he wanted it to be true, needed it to be true.

The first rush of adrenalin that had gotten him this far began to fade and he knew he had no strength left to fight. His knees buckled and he felt gentle arms catch him and lower him to the floor. Daystrom could never have been called gentle. The out-of-focus face so close to his became clear and he recognized McCoy.

"Bones?" he repeated, then squeezed his eyes tightly shut as a tear tracked its way down his cheek. He slipped into the blessed darkness of unconsciousness, secure in the knowledge that Bones would take care of him.



Several sensations assailed Spock at once. The first was stabbing pain in his left arm and his head. He could not spare even the slightest bit of psychic energy to keep it at bay.

He kept his eyes closed, preferring to determine what he could of his surroundings before making anyone aware of his return to consciousness.

The other sensation was a familiar one -- the almost subliminal throb of a ship's engines. A much smaller one than the Enterprise he would surmise.

There were several unidentifiable noises and then a voice, gruff and deep, speaking gutteral Standard.

"Well?"

"The left arm's broken, Captain, and he's got a slight concussion," came the whiny reply.

"Fix him up. We don't deliver damaged merchandise."

Spock heard a door open and close and ventured a quick look through slitted eyes. There was a man across the room from him with his back to Spock. A hasty appraisal of various items within his line of vision told him it was a sickbay -- of sorts. The equipment was scanty and definitely substandard.

He decided to risk letting the man know he was awake. "Where am I?" he asked weakly.

The man dropped whatever he had been holding with a metallic clatter and whirled around to face the Vulcan.

"You're aboard the Red Rose," came the nervous reply.

"Which tells me precisely nothing," Spock responded, trying to sit up. Straps on his right arm and legs quickly changed his mind.

The man moved to a cabinet and removed a small instrument and approached the wary Vulcan.

"I'm going to laser-fuse that break in your arm."

"Are you a physician?"

The man laughed acidly. "I've had some medical training. The crew call me Doc."

Somehow his answer did nothing to inspire Spock's confidence. However, he had little choice in the matter. Gaining his freedom and continuing his pursuit of Daystrom necessitated having full use of both arms.

Doc was a small, pale man whom Spock determined would be easily overpowered. The man's hands trembled as he cut open the sleeve of Spock's shirt and strapped his arm into position.

The laser beam was a searing, burning agony and Spock could barely keep from crying out.

"Sorry about the pain. Don't keep no Vulcan drugs."

Spock nodded briefly and tried to control his rising nausea. After what seemed an eternity, it was finished.

"It'll be stiff for a while, but won't give you no problems."

Before Spock could reply, the door opened and a large, swarthy man entered the room to stand, hands on hips, staring at Spock.

"He's all fixed up, Cap'n Riga," Doc said, unconsciously backing off a step, obviously frightened.

The man brushed him aside and walked over to where Spock lay. "Not quite up to Enterprise standards, eh Spock?" Riga laughed at the look of surprise the Vulcan could not quite conceal.

"How do you know my identity?"

"It wasn't hard to figure out. It's common knowledge that wherever you find Kirk, his Vulcan shadow is right behind. Did you think a ship like the Enterprise could visit a hellhole like Omega X and not have everybody talking?" The man's hard, dark eyes glittered in amusement.

Spock held back the torrent of angry questions he wanted to ask. This sorry excuse for a human standing over him quite possibly held the answers to some of his questions, but it would not due to lose control at this point when he was in no position to force the issue.

The man clapped his hands and smiled delightedly. "Wonderful! Stoic Vulcan to the end! Well, I'm not a cruel man, Spock. I'll tell you what you want to know even if you don't ask."

Riga pulled a chair up to Spock's bed and settled back comfortably, thoroughly enjoying himself.

"I'm what is colorfully referred to as a space pirate, though I prefer to think of myself as a private, rather ingenious businessman. In any case, I make my living anywhere and anyway I can. By some lucky coincidence, we happened to be in port the same time as your illustrious Enterprise. Quite a ship, that."

The smile was still on Riga's lips but his eyes had taken on a brittle glint of bitterness. He stared at Spock. "I could have captained a ship like that."

Then the animation returned to his face and, lacing his fingers behind his head, he leaned the battered chair back on the back legs. "But that's another story. Anyway, it wasn't hard to find the famous Captain, it's not as if the Enterprise crew was inconspicuous or anything, and the minute he was alone..." "

Riga let the leading statement hang, watching Spock carefully for any reaction. The Vulcan face was totally immobile and quite unreadable.

"You took him and delivered him to Daystrom?" Spock asked woodenly. "Bounty?" he added in a deceptively calm voice.

"Rather poetically put, Spock, but essentially correct."

"And were you there when..." his voice trailed off as blood-spattered memories assailed him.

"Oh yeah, I was there. That Daystrom, he's really clever. How he was able to push Kirk as far as he did without killing him... and that drug... that's something I'm going to have to get a supply of."

Riga looked pointedly at Doc quivering in the corner. "For disobedient crewmen... and general purposes."

The memories of Kirk's tortured body beat at Spock's carefully constructed mental barriers. How easy, how welcome it would be to let those barriers fall and join Kirk in oblivion.

Riga suddenly realized he had lost his audience. "Spock," he growled, roughly grabbing Spock's recently fused arm to get his attention.

Spock's eyes focused and once again he stared unblinkingly at Riga.

"That's better. Now, to continue my tale. We hung around the free port after Daystrom left. I figured it was only a matter of time before you showed up. Sure enough... and now I get to collect from Daystrom again. I'm sure he'll have a lot more fun with you than he did your soft, weak Captain!"

He seemed to derive great amusement from the thought. Spock was certain that with chi'Kir compelling him, he could easily break his bonds and kill Riga, even with only one good hand. The thought seemed to give him comfort somehow. He fought for control.

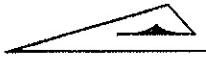
"You are taking me to Daystrom?" came the careful question.

Riga misinterpreted Spock's quiet demeanor for fear and laughed delightedly. "Should be there in a few hours. He's holed up on some backwater planet... Shangri-La they call it."

He stood, grasping Spock's good shoulder in a vice-like grip.

"You rest up now, Mr. Enterprise First Officer. I want you in tip-top condition when I deliver you to Daystrom."

The Vulcan focused his eyes on the ceiling and did not hear Riga leave. He tried to sort through his jumbled thoughts but the fires of chi'Kir lent an air of unreality to everything. Only one image was clear: Daystrom would soon be within his reach. Kirk would have called it luck. Sleep overtook him before he could put his own name to it.



Two days passed before Kirk became fully aware of his surroundings. McCoy stood at the side of his bed, smiling gently.

"Welcome back, Jim."

Kirk licked his dry lips and tried to speak. After one or two raspy false starts, he finally managed to croak, "How am I?"

"How do you feel?" McCoy countered.

"Like hell, if you must know."

McCoy's smile broadened. "Considering how close you came to never feeling anything again, I think a little more gratitude is in order."

"How long have I been out?"

"About two days. You realize you're making a very old man of me, don't you? Every time you pull one of these stunts, you take ten years off my life!"

"Believe me, Bones, I didn't do it on purpose." He tried to shift his position and found he lacked the strength to do even such a simple thing.

McCoy lifted Kirk's shoulders and helped him ease into a more comfortable position.

"Thanks. How long am I going to be stuck here, anyway?"

"That all depends on how well you follow your doctor's orders, my friend." McCoy moved away to study some data on the computer terminal, results of tests he had run earlier on the Captain.

It was then that Kirk became aware of an aching sense of loss, an emptiness, a feeling of terrible loneliness such as he had never experienced before. Then he knew -- Spock.

"Where is he, Bones?" Kirk whispered.

McCoy froze, unwilling to turn and face the anguish he heard in the Captain's voice. He had dreaded this moment, hoping the painkillers and tranquilizers would keep Kirk from figuring things out immediately. He should have known better. "He's gone," McCoy said, squaring his shoulders, "left the ship."

"What do you mean, gone? Gone where?"

"We don't know. He turned command over to Scotty and left."

Kirk tried to make sense out of what McCoy was telling him. "But why, Bones? Why would he leave?"

McCoy shuddered at the memory of that moment frozen in time which had set Spock on a path where none of them could follow.

Still not able to face Kirk, McCoy said quietly, "He thinks you're dead, that you died during surgery. Technically, you did. Your heart stopped and by the time we'd revived you, he was gone."

The doctor turned quickly and the words tumbled out in an unstoppable rush. McCoy was not certain Kirk was up to hearing it, but he had a right to know the truth.

"Spock was watching through the observation window. At the instant your heart stopped and the monitors went off, I glanced up and Spock was... was... I don't know exactly how to put it. He was withdrawing, leaving even as he stood there. I'll never forget the look in his eyes."

"Go on," Kirk commanded quietly.

"With M'Benga's help, we finally got you back. By the time I could leave you for a few minutes, Scotty came and told me that Spock had gone, beamed down to the free port."

"He's after Daystrom," Kirk said with dreadful certainty.

McCoy sighed. "Yes. We sent teams down to try to find him but no luck."

Kirk turned his head to stare at the ceiling. "If Spock finds Daystrom, he'll kill him. The chi'Kir demands it," he said more to himself than McCoy.

"Jim, there's more. As soon as I knew we couldn't find Spock, I got in touch with Sarek. I thought Spock might contact him for some reason and he could tell Spock that you were alive. Did Spock tell you that the death of one Pledge-Mate means the other will die as well?"

Kirk's startled look gave him his answer. McCoy plunged on before Kirk could launch the thousand questions the doctor saw in his eyes. "When I told Sarek what had happened, he said that even temporary, clinical death could sever the link. The survivor would then construct a mental shield, complete the chi'Kir and then join the Pledge-Mate in death. Because the ceremony you and Spock had was not a full one, Sarek had not been concerned that such a thing could happen. He did not think the Pledge would have the same effect today that it had 5,000 years ago, especially when one of the participants was human. Though he was polite enough not to say so outright."

"We have to find him, Bones. If he gets near Daystrom, he could get killed. And all for nothing."

"Jim, we don't have a clue as to where to start," McCoy argued.

"There has to be a way." If he could only think. His mind was foggy with drugs.

"Jim..."

"And no more tranquilizers, Doctor. None, understood? I need a clear head."

McCoy heard the tones of command though the voice was a weak whisper and nodded. "All right, nothing except essential pain killers."

When Kirk did not answer, McCoy added, "Don't think we've finished this conversation, either. You have a lot of questions to answer, both as the Captain and as my friend. We're not finished with this by a long shot!"



The shuttle from the Red Rose shuddered to a stop and Spock was pushed toward the door with a phaser at his back. He was bound by stasis cuffs on his arms and legs with only enough freedom of movement to wobble. His legs were stiff from days of confinement.

The shuttle entry opened and brilliant sunlight poured in. The tangy smell of a salty sea reached him and Spock winced inwardly at the familiar memories the sea evoked.

And then he was outside. The ocean was a brilliant aquamarine that lapped lazily at the pink sand beach they had landed on. Towering cliffs of sparkling pink rock reached into a cloudless azure sky. Golden, gull-like birds wheeled and dove in the clear air above them. There was a faint scent of flowers carried on the breeze that ruffled his hair. How Jim would love it here -- stop! he commanded himself, trying to close his ears to the remembered plea. A beach to walk on, such a simple thing to want, now never to be. Why did Riga have to bring them to a beach?

Rough hands shoved him into a sitting position in the sand and Riga walked over to him.

"Sent a message to Daystrom. He's got some of his men coming to pick you up so you just relax and enjoy the scenery... while you can!"

Spock leaned his head forward and rested it on his bent knees. He wondered what had brought Daystrom here and found himself repelled at the thought of such a sadistic set loose in such a peaceful and beautiful world.

Hours passed and soon the setting sun turned the rocky cliffs into walls of deepest rose. The sound of the surf was somehow soothing to his battered soul though the rage burned undimmed within him.

Stars appeared in the blue-black sky and several of the guards and Riga settled down to sleep.

Spock had lain back on the still-warm sand when he sensed someone behind him.

"Don't move," came a whispered voice.

Spock felt the stasis cuffs being released and turned to see Doc behind him, faintly visible in the starlight. As soon as his legs were free, they began to crawl cautiously away toward the base of the cliff behind them.

They soon found a break in the cliff face and a narrow, rock strewn path that led upward. They began to climb as rapidly as possible but it seemed to take hours to reach the summit.

Once they reached it, Spock had no idea which direction to take. All that mattered was getting as far away from Riga as possible. He would find Daystrom in his own time, now.

He headed into the heavily wooded area in front of them, Doc panting at his heels.

After several minutes of tripping over unseen roots and pushing branches and vines out of their faces, Spock halted their headlong flight.

He stood, listening intently but detected no pursuit. There were only the normal night bird sounds and the faint hum of never still insects to disturb the dark.

They found a small clearing with a narrow rill of a creek running through it. Spock reflected that it would have been wise to check the water before drinking it but Doc had already done so before he could voice caution.

At last, they leaned back against the sheltering trees and took their first calm breaths in hours.

"Why did you release me?" was Spock's first question.

Doc squirmed under the Vulcan's riveting gaze. "I... I couldn't let him give you to that crazy guy," he finally got out.

"Explain," Spock pressed.

"I... I was there, in that room when they... I done some pretty bad things in my life, but I ain't never hurt no one on purpose. Ya see?"

The night noises seemed to fade away and for Spock there was only a voice and the image of a blood-spattered room.

"Tell me," he said softly.

Doc had no doubts about what the Vulcan meant. He wrapped his arms around his drawn-up legs and shivered despite the warm night air.

"Riga had us bring him to a place in the city, an old warehouse of some kind. He waited around awhile and then Daystrom and his men showed up. He paid Riga off and I thought that was that. But Daystrom asked Riga if he'd like to stay and see the fun."

Deep inside Spock a voice screamed out, wanting to tell the man to shut up, not to say another word. And yet he had to know, chi'Kir demanded it.

"Your friend was tied hand and foot and Daystrom had two of his men hold him while he beat him, bad. Your Captain took that beating without makin' a sound. That really made Daystrom mad. And then Daystrom... he gave him that damn drug and bet your friend that he'd beg for death afore he was through with him. Your friend just sorta smiled and shook his head."

Doc's words slowed, his eyes growing distant, as he remembered. "Then Daystrom finally took that knife..." He stopped again, swallowing hard, unable to finish. In the light of the newly-risen moon, he could see the Vulcan's face. It was the face of death, a mask of hatred and loathing so pronounced that it turned him into a vengeful god before Doc's eyes.

"Finish it," came the caldonic whisper. Doc nodded, forcing the words through clenched teeth. "Daystrom cut the rope on Kirk's feet and tried to make him stand, but he couldn't no more... Daystrom was so mad 'cause Kirk wouldn't beg... God, I was so scared... but Daystrom kept telling him if he would only beg him, he would end it. Then there was blood everywhere, Daystrom wouldn't stop... I ain't never seen so much blood and a man still livin'..." Doc was rambling, lost in the memories as he recounted the event. He turned frightened, pleading eyes to the Vulcan. "I ain't never seen a man as brave as your friend. He never did beg, he didn't... but at the end, he smiled... smiled!"

The words faded into the night, desperate and tinged with hysteria, but Spock remained unmoving.

Doc tried to make Spock understand. "Don't you see? I couldn't be a part of that, not again. So when I seen the chance to free you..."

"I... thank you," Spock said after a moment. He shuddered slightly and seemed to force himself back to the lonely present.

"What do you know about this planet?"

"Damn little, only what I overheard them talkin' about on the ship. A bunch of religious crazies settled here a couple of years ago. For some reason Daystrom wants control of this place, and got it, so I hear. There's only one settlement, no trade, nothing to please a man. The settlement's inland a'ways. My guess is that's where Daystrom is; no place else for him to be."

Spock nodded. At first light, he would begin his search.

Doc watched the Vulcan cautiously, totally terrified by something he could not put a name to. Finally, a haunted sleep overtook him, taking him to a place he really did not want to go.



When Kirk awoke several hours later, he found himself somewhat stronger, enough so that he was able to issue a not-to-be-argued-with, if somewhat weak order to the nurse on duty to summon Mr. Scott.

Within a few minutes, Scott reported to the Captain's bedside.

"Scotty, what's happening? Have you had any word on Spock?"

With a worried expression, the Chief Engineer studied his Captain. He knew Kirk was not going to like what he had to tell him.

"There's no sign of him, sir. We've searched that place from top to bottom. He's just not there."

"That's not good enough. He's got to be there."

Scott stood at silent attention. There was nothing more to be said. At least nothing Kirk wanted to hear.

"I should be returning to the bridge, sir."

"That's an excellent idea, Mr. Scott," came the voice from the doorway. McCoy threw Kirk an irritated look and shooed Scott toward the door.

"All right, Jim, what's the big idea? You're supposed to be resting."

"I have to find him, Bones, before Daystrom does."

"All you have to do is what I tell you to do. And I'm telling you to be quiet and rest. Period." McCoy frowned in concern, laying a hand on Kirk's shoulder.

"Listen to me, Jim. Less than 48 hours ago, you were dead. It's nothing short of a miracle that you're still alive. I'd like to keep it that way."

Kirk braced his hands on the sides of the bed, trying to rise. He fell back, exhausted with the effort. "But I've got to find him, Bones..."

McCoy shook his head, trying to deny the look of desperation he saw in Kirk's eyes. "You're not going anywhere, Jim, for at least ten days. I'll make that a direct order if I have to."

Kirk looked at McCoy, hard accusations in his eyes. Then he glanced away. "It will be too late," he said distantly. "The trail will be cold and..."

"You'll just have to trust Scotty, then," McCoy tried to reassure him. "He's good, Jim. You've trusted him a thousand times before."

"It will be too late," he repeated. The his fist pounded the bed in frustration and anger. He realized for the first time just how much he hated Daystrom for what he had done to him, and now to Spock.



Spock made his way resolutely forward through the dense woods, Doc struggling to keep pace with the silent Vulcan.

The little man remembered waking with the early dawn light to find Spock still sitting in the same position, eyes open and staring. He knew what the Vulcan was seeing; he had experienced more than a few nightmares himself since Daystrom's torture of Kirk, most of them while he was wide awake.

They had walked for hours, the cool morning air warming as the sun rose high overhead. At least Doc supposed it had. The blue-barked trees had two-foot wide leaves that met overhead and formed a canopy that shut out nearly all of the light. The leaves were striped in shades of green from palest lime to deepest emerald.

Finally, the pace had become too much for him. Doc planted his feet firmly in place and refused to budge another inch, Vulcan or no Vulcan.

"I ain't movin' till I get some rest. You go on without me, if you want."

Spock sighed and returned to where Doc had thrown himself down to lean against one of the towering trees. The Vulcan stood, hands locked behind his back, struggling mightily to control the burning rages. He owed this man the chance he now had to complete chi'Kir. It was little enough to give him time to rest.

Doc watched Spock closely, noting the haunted, grieving look that never left his eyes. "It musta been great to have that kind of friend," he said wistfully. "I ain't never been able to trust nobody. Never wanted to."

Spock pretended not to understand, walking a few paces away to study the mottled bark of one of the trees. His back was turned, and so deep was his concentration on the powers within, that he did not see the black rat-like creature as it crept down the tree Doc leaned against.

The human's scream of pain as the animal sank razor-sharp teeth deep into his shoulder brought Spock back to him instantly. Weaponless, the Vulcan grabbed a length of wood from the ground and struck the vicious animal hard enough to break its neck; still it clung to Doc's shoulder.

Spock reached down, grabbed the animal behind the head and squeezed, forcing the jaws to open and releasing Doc's shoulder from its death grip. Little blood flowed from the bite and Spock feared poisoning.

Carefully tearing the shirt free of Doc's shoulder, Spock examined the narrow twin slashes.

"How... how bad?" Doc asked, his voice trembling.

Spock did not wish to answer. "It must be cleansed," he said evasively. He grabbed the pieces of torn shirt and moved off through the trees.

"Don't leave me!" Spock heard the frantic scream behind him but was too concerned with finding water to answer. After a few minutes, he located a small stream. Soaking Doc's shirt in it, he tried to scrub away some of the grime. Then, using one of the broad leaves of the overhead trees, he curled it to form a cup, cautiously carrying the water to Doc.

"Drink this," Spock ordered.

"I thought you was leavin' me," Doc said, reaching for the water.

Spock cleansed the wound with hands surprisingly gentle. When he was finished, he said, "We will spend the night here and leave at first light."

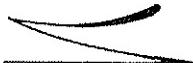
Doc nodded, then leaned his head back against the tree, trying to sleep. Sweat glistened on his forehead.

Spock sat down beside him, lost in thought. The chi'Kir was truly becoming all-consuming. He had not heard the animal's descent down the trunk of the tree though he was only a few feet away. His time-sense was lost to him as well, leaving him with only a vague notion of the hour.

He allowed himself the first level of meditation. Sleep was, of course, out of the question. He found his mind drifting back to the ship, to his life as it had been. Long buried emotions of loss and sorrow washed over him and he had no defense against them.

And there was something else. Some inner voice called to him -- Kirk's voice, insisting and gentle, tinged with something Spock could not quite identify. Spock could not discern what the voice was saying, only that it called to him from beyond the barrier he had constructed around the severed link.

"No!" came the whispered denial. "Not yet... "



Kirk's eyes were staring and unfocused as he concentrated all his mental strength on breaking through the wall Spock had created in his mind. Somehow, he had to reach him, stop him from fulfilling the vengeance demanded of chi'Kir.

If Spock killed Daystrom and then found that Kirk lived, as he would when he lowered the mind barrier to follow Kirk into death, he would never forgive himself for taking a life needlessly.

"Not that the bastard doesn't deserve killing several times over," Kirk muttered to himself. But for Spock to be the instrument of Daystrom's death promised only emotional destruction for the Vulcan who held the sanctity of all life in such high regard. And there was the very real possibility that Daystrom could kill Spock.

"Damn," Kirk said aloud as McCoy entered the ward.

The doctor approached the bed briskly, taking in the readings on the body function panel at a glance. Not great, but stable at any rate. He did not think the agitation on Kirk's face was the result of anything physical.

"Problem, Jim?" he asked carefully.

"Yeah. Several. Beginning with the fact that I'm weak as a kitten and mad as hell."

"Interesting combination," McCoy replied. "Just take it easy and do what your family physician tells you and you'll be up and around soon."

"But not soon enough," Kirk answered bleakly.

McCoy had no reply. What was troubling his Captain and his friend was beyond his ability to repair. And what he had to tell him was not going to help one hell of a lot.

"Jim... Scotty received orders from Starfleet a few minutes ago. We're to leave orbit and go back on patrol."

Kirk opened his mouth to object and just as quickly closed it.

"We're to keep an eye on the Neutral Zone. They've had reports of Klingon cruisers in the area."

Kirk swallowed hard and nodded. Much as his personal feelings dictated staying here to look for Spock, his first duty lay in following Starfleet's orders. He could not justify keeping the Enterprise off-line any longer.

"Tell Scotty... tell him I understand. He's to follow orders as directed."

McCoy felt a sense of pride in Kirk. He knew what giving up the search was costing him in personal torment.

"I'll tell him. It'll make it easier on him. You know if you told him to fly this ship straight into a nova, he'd do it."

Kirk responded with a small smile. "I know. Which is the very thing that keeps me from doing what I'd really like to do. I have no right to jeopardize his life or career or the crew's for a personal reason." His eyes met McCoy's. "But dammit! How I want to!"



Doc's moans drew Spock from his light meditative trance. Several hours must have passed. The only light came from the weak moonlight filtering through the trees.

Spock touched Doc's head and found that he was burning with fever and murmuring unintelligibly. Spock checked the wounded area and even in the uncertain light he could tell it was discolored and swollen. The sickly-sweet smell confirmed his fears. There was nothing Spock could do for him except bring more water from the stream.

By morning, Doc's delirium took the form of screams of anger against an unseen foe. Spock had to hold him to keep him from thrashing about.

The Vulcan was no longer concerned about Daystrom or his men finding them. It was obvious that the scientist knew Spock was coming to him and had decided to play a waiting game. It would amuse Daystrom to pit himself against the Vulcan, to prolong the moment of confrontation. It had been so long in coming, Daystrom would not rush it.

Yet the forces of chi'Kir was a factor of which Daystrom was not aware. He was counting on Spock being angered by Kirk's death and careless in his pursuit of the perpetrator. Daystrom was also making the dangerous assumption that Spock would be weakened by his injury and from the long chase through the forests of this world.

However, Daystrom had been wrong before, and he was wrong now. The forces of chi'Kir had been refined by millennia of survival of the fittest. It created within Spock the strength of several Vulcans, streamlining the demands of his Vulcan body, sublimating all facets of existence except those that were absolutely necessary to the

fulfillment of chi'Kir. What strengths he already possessed were magnified tenfold by chi'Kir and whatever shortcomings Spock would feel in his physical body would be overcome by his strength of mind. Chi'Kir was a force of vengeance and retribution, designed by that most basic of instincts -- continuance.

As the day stretched on with no change in Doc's condition, Spock knew the blood poisoning would certainly kill the frail human. All Spock could do was stay with him until he died.

The Vulcan's need to continue with the search all but transcended the thin shred of civilization remaining to him yet he would not abandon the helpless, dying man. He banked the rage and anger, using every discipline known to him and continued the death-watch.



McCoy returned from a late lunch to find his star patient sitting on the side of the bed, white-faced and shaking. He did not notice McCoy enter the room.

"And just what do you think you're doing?"

Kirk looked up quickly, his expression a mixture of defiance and anger. "What does it look like I'm doing?" He edged off the bed and onto his feet. He stood swaying for a moment before clutching the edge of the bed for support.

McCoy took a firm hold on his arm. "Captain, I'm ordering you back to bed!"

Kirk would have argued but the weakness that was draining what little strength he had overtook him. He lay back, face glistening with sweat.

"All right... for now," he half-whispered, more to himself than McCoy. "How soon do we leave orbit?"

McCoy looked at him warily. "Eight hours or so. There was some minor problem in Engineering that has to be taken care of first. Why?"

Kirk did not answer but stared pensively at the ceiling. McCoy knew that look all too well. It was the stubborn I-may-be-down-but-I'm-sure-as-hell-not-out look that had gotten all of them out of many impossible situations.

"Just what are you planning, Captain?"

Kirk tried to bluff his way out. "I'm too tired to plan anything, Bones..."

"Don't give me that. I know you, remember? You think you're going to leave the ship before we break orbit and go after Spock!"

Kirk did not deny it.

"Jim, be reasonable. We've searched that free port building by building and found nothing."

"Do you think the breed of fugitives that inhabit that place would spill their guts to anyone from Starfleet? If I can get back down there, pass myself off as one of them..."

"You're crazy! Starfleet would never sanction..."

"I hadn't planned on asking Starfleet's permission."

"And I repeat -- you're crazy! Think what you're saying, Jim. You're going to leave this ship with no First Officer and now, no Captain?"

Kirk stared at the ceiling, willing away the word McCoy had not said. Duty. His first duty was to this ship and his crew. No matter how much he might wish otherwise.

He turned his head to meet McCoy's eyes. "When you're right, you're right, Doctor. You can relax, you've made your point."

McCoy dropped into the chair beside Kirk's bed. "I know you're worried, Jim. So am I. But somehow I have a feeling we'll find him. And Daystrom, too."

Kirk's face became a closed mask at the mention of the name and an alarm went off in McCoy's mind as he realized that Kirk had never mentioned the pain inflicted upon him nor the man responsible.

"Scotty found out that some of Daystrom's cronies broke him out of the rehab colony. He managed to disappear until now. The colony supervisor says he's completely mad."

Still no response. The alarms were really going off now.

"I'm very tired, Bones. Do you mind?" Kirk turned on his side and closed his eyes.

"No, Jim. Just rest. We'll talk later."



Doc slipped into a deep, coma-like state, his fever raging ever higher.

On the morning of the second day, Spock watched helplessly as he drew one final, shuddering breath and was still.

Spock sat next to him, head lowered. He had no means of digging a grave; Vulcan custom called for cremation which was equally impossible. He spent the better part of the day gathering rocks and building a cairn. It was all he could do.

His task completed, he stood for a moment remembering the small man and his very large act of courage.

Spock decided to follow the stream. Perhaps it would lead him to the settlement. He set off, grim determination replacing all other thoughts or emotions.



Scott, coming off duty, stopped by sickbay and found the CMO in his office. Feet propped on his desk, McCoy studied the sleeping Captain through his office window.

Scott settled himself in the chair next to McCoy's desk. His eyes followed McCoy's to the still form in the ward. The engineer's heart ached for the pain his Captain had suffered. And the physical pain was the least of it. He turned to face the doctor.

"How is he, Leonard? Really?"

McCoy smiled ruefully. "Ready to go after Spock on his hands and knees but knowing he can't. How do you think he is?"

"I'd have given anything to have found Spock, Leonard."

"I know, Scotty, and so does he."

The words seemed to ease the engineer's burden somewhat.

For the first time, Scott really looked at the doctor. And he didn't like what he saw. Worry, fatigue, fear had all taken their toll. McCoy looked as if one more blow would be more than he could take.

"Can you leave him for awhile, Leonard? I could use some dinner and some company?"

McCoy nodded. "Just let me tell the duty nurse where I'll be. It seems like days since I've eaten."



After Spock had walked several hours, the trees began to thin. The carpet of thick moss underfoot was studded with red and yellow flowers. There seemed to be no birds but Spock did spot several small rabbit-like animals scurrying through the brush.

The deep, green stream he had followed out of the woods now tumbled and gurgled over several large boulders, creating a white, foamy spray as it picked up momentum. Pausing behind one of the massive trees, he surveyed the land ahead of him.

The ground dropped away abruptly into a grassy valley. In the distance, glistening like a white pearl in the brilliant sunshine, lay the settlement.

Spock estimated another two hour hike to reach it but chose to wait for the cover of night. In all probability, it would make little difference. Daystrom no doubt had set some sort of trap for him but Spock wanted to engage the battle in his own time and on ground of his own choosing, if possible.

He returned to the stream and knelt on the mossy bank to drink, cupping his hand and leaning down to scoop up the water. In the still pool behind the boulder rapids, he clearly saw his reflection: the face of a stranger, harsh, deeply lined, void of all emotion. It was the mask of vengeance, the face of death.



McCoy had spent a restless dinner and found trying to relax with Scott in the rec room impossible. When he returned to sickbay and found Kirk already awake, he was less than pleased.

He stopped the nurse as she left Kirk's room. "I left orders that I was to be notified if the Captain began to awaken," he said heatedly.

"Dr. McCoy, I did try to contact you but you had already left the rec room to return here. The Captain is only now fully awake," she answered.

"I see. I'm sorry I jumped you, Ella. Taking my bad temper out on you." He moved past her and went to Kirk. "How are you feeling, Jim?"

The Captain's eyes seemed very large and dark in the pale face. There was a slight shrug. McCoy sensed Kirk pulling away. Taking a deep breath, he knew he had to try to reach him. "Jim, I think we need to talk. About what Daystrom did to you."

The dark eyes narrowed and for a moment McCoy thought all the buried anger would come spilling out. Then, the look faded and Kirk looked away. "It doesn't matter what he did to me. All that matters is..."

"Bullshit! Of course it matters what he did to you. My god, he nearly killed you! Don't you care about that? Aren't you angry that he hurt you? I am. I'm damn angry! If I had him here right now..." McCoy stopped. He hadn't meant to air his feelings, only to help Kirk deal with his.

Kirk closed his eyes. "Bones, please don't do this."

"Jim..."

"Please, just leave me alone."

McCoy sighed and stood. Kirk's depression was deepening and he could not find a way to bring him out of it.

"Jim," he tried again. There was no response; McCoy nodded and returned to his office.

Kirk watched him leave and then forced himself to a sitting position. His energy drained by inactivity, he found that an almost impossible task to do. In the quiet of the now empty room, he felt responsibility settle on his shoulders with the weight of a world. It was a burden he must bear in silence until the situation was resolved by Spock -- one way or another. It was out of his hands. All that was left to him was his Command and so he determined to shoulder it and fulfill it to the best of his ability.

He looked up to see McCoy in his office talking to M'Benga. Kirk wanted to forgive him for what he made him see. A part of him knew and accepted that the doctor had been right. But another, deeper part of him resented him because he was right; resented having to concede that part of his life was no more. A deep, vital core of his life's essence was gone.



The following morning, Spock reached the outer edge of the settlement and hid himself in the shadows.

His first glimpse of the settlement had been of stark white buildings set against a backdrop of verdant green. But as he approached his objective, it became apparent that something devastating had happened. Wisps of black smoke became visible and he soon determined that what he had first seen as buildings were only shells and partial walls. The settlement had been destroyed; all that remained were smoldering ruins and blackened shapes that could have been bodies. All around was only deadly silence, not even an insect stirred.

The carnage that lay before Spock explained why Daystrom had not come after him; he had been too busy wreaking havoc on this tiny village.

Spock decided to search the ruins, not really expecting to find anything, but at least it was something to do while he tried to formulate a plan. Possibly there would be some clue as to Daystrom's intentions or where he had disappeared to. Somehow, Spock had to find a way to follow him, confront him, complete chi'Kir.

A faint sound caused him to quickly turn in yet another direction. He rounded a partially standing wall to see a frail human female seated on the blackened ground, her head resting on her drawn-up knees. A muffled sob escaped into the eerie stillness.

The Vulcan's footsteps brought her instantly to her feet, large blue eyes wide with sheer terror.

"Who are you?" she rasped, backing away from the grimfaced Vulcan.

"I mean you no harm. What happened to your village?

The girl shuddered, tears spilling out of her eyes and making tracks down her dirt-smudged cheeks.

"Who are you?" she repeated, angrily brushing away the tears, lifting her chin in a touch a defiance.

"My name is Spock. I..."

"I know who you are," she fairly hissed at him, hatred taking the place of grief on her face. "This is all your fault! Everyone dead, all your fault!"

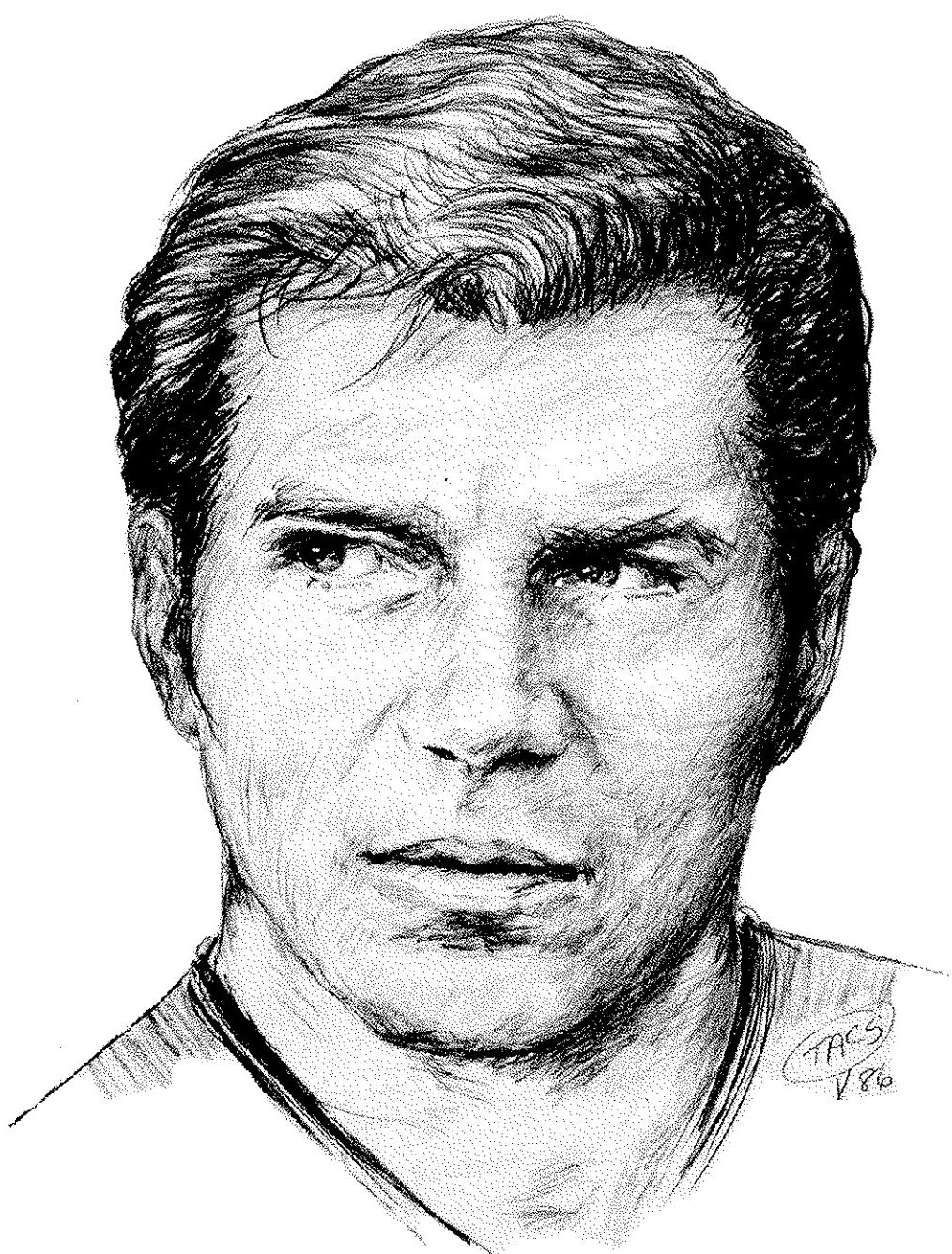
Her words as much as her violent emotions at first confused Spock, but he really could not bring himself to care. All that mattered was finding Daystrom.

"Where are the ones who did this?" he demanded.

She seemed to look through him. "It was so beautiful here. Everyone was so happy, peace at last... and now they're all dead."

Shattered bits of memory tumbled through Spock's mind, what Doc had said about the planet, settled by a bunch of religious crazies as he had called them.

Spock forced his attention back to the girl, concentrating on her. "All were murdered except you? Why were you spared?"



She shook her flaxen blonde head and turned as if to go.

Spock started after her. "Wait! Do not go until you have told..." He reached to take her arm to stop her when suddenly she was simply no longer there. No transporter effect, no illusions or transmutations, just there one moment and gone the next.

Spock stood alone in the midst of total devastation that began in his soul and now included his physical surroundings.



James Kirk paced his bridge like a caged animal. He paused at the com station. "Uhura?"

She shook her head. "Nothing yet, sir. I'm still trying."

"Very well. I'll be in the main briefing room. If you can contact anyone, relay it down there."

Uhura watched him leave the bridge, his whole body rigid with pain. She had never seen him so hurt, and so determined not to let anyone see it. Any words of consolation or concern were briskly cut off. Everything was to be strictly business and by-the-book... that much had quickly became apparent.



Kirk stood at the head of the briefing room table. "I have an announcement," Kirk began without preamble. "I have had word from Starfleet that before we resume patrolling the Neutral Zone, we are to make a stop at Star Base 6. There we will pick up Lts. Devon and Sanchez. They have been assigned to the Enterprise as Science Officer and First... Officer, effective immediately. They will be accorded your full respect and cooperation."

He did not ask for comments and none were offered. The totality of Spock's absence was suddenly driven home to all those present.

"There have been reports of Klingon cruisers near the Neutral Zone. As soon as we leave the Star Base, we will be checking out those reports." He looked from one face to another, finally resting on McCoy. He didn't like the determination he saw there. "If there are no questions, this briefing is concluded."

One by one the department heads filed out till only McCoy was left.

"It hurts, doesn't it, Jim?"

Kirk stood and turned to leave.

"It's like admitting Spock's never coming back, having a new First Officer."

The doctor watched Kirk's back straighten and his hands clench into fists at his sides.

"You have to face it, Jim. You've been burying your anger under your concern for Spock and it's festered and eaten away at you." McCoy sat very still, waiting to see

what effect his words would have. He hated digging at Jim this way when he seemed least able to deal with it but it was a boil that had to be lanced.

Kirk strode back to the table and leaned over McCoy. "What is it you want of me, Doctor?" he hissed. "You want me to say I'm angry? Alright. I'm angry! I'm furious! That maniac nearly killed me. And while I laid on the floor in agony, he laughed. Laughed for god's sake! How can one human being do that to another, Bones? How?" The words tumbled out. A torrent of hurt and rage.

Kirk straightened and walked to the other side of the room. "I hate him, Bones. I could kill him with my bare hands but instead I have to find him somehow before Spock does. Ironic, isn't it?"

There was a bitter laugh that chilled McCoy to the bone. "Jim..." he rose and went to stand behind Kirk.

"You wanted to hear this, Doctor. Now shut up and listen. Do you know why I hate Daystrom? Not for the physical pain but because he made me feel fear, I knew I was going to die and I was afraid."

"Jim, look at me."

Kirk turned eyes wide with memory.

"There's nothing wrong with being afraid. You're only human, not superhuman. I've been trying to tell you that for years. If it's any consolation I was afraid too. And angry. I hate Daystrom too -- for what he's done to you and to Spock." He gripped Kirk's arms and felt a fine shudder run through the Captain's body as he fought for control.

Uhura's voice broke the moment.

"Captain Kirk, I have your transmission ready."

Kirk moved to the small viewscreen. "Go ahead Uhura, relay it."

The screen filled with the face of Dr. Lenton Dooley, supervisor of Rehab Colony Two.

"Captain Kirk, what can I do for you?"

"I'm trying to find Dr. Richard Daystrom. I understand he escaped from your facility some months ago."

Dooley's wide blue eyes opened wider still. "Do you know where he is? He must be returned to us. He's very dangerous you know."

Kirk sat in one of the chairs, a small smile crossed his face. Talk about understatement. "We're attempting to find him, Doctor. Did he ever mention where he would go if he left the Rehab Colony?"

"Oh, you know. Just rambling. Nothing that made sense. Seemed real hung upon Shangri-La. You know the story, Captain?"

Kirk not only knew the story, he knew the planet. "Doctor, you've been a great help! I'll let you know if we find Dr. Daystrom. Kirk out."

He slammed the unit off with his open palm and looked up at McCoy with a genuine smile of triumph. "I know where they are, Bones! I know where Shangri-La is!"



Spock spent the rest of that day and most of the next searching the ruins of the settlement and the surrounding countryside for the girl. He found nothing. Frustration built in him, fueling the anger until it threatened to consume him.

The night was starless and only a sliver of a moon lit the settlement. He had no choice but to stop his search until the dawn. He hunkered down against a stump of blackened tree and tried to meditate but chi'Kir denied him even that small surcease. Without realizing it, one fist pounded incessantly against the rough bark of the tree until it was flecked with dark green.

At dawn, Spock stood and stretched stiff muscles, not even seeing the spectacular crimson and pink sunrise. Beauty was lost to him as was happiness and hope. All that remained was honor and an end to his grief.

He had to find the girl. She was his only tie to Daystrom. "Where are you?" he shouted into the funereal landscape with no hope of reply. "I must talk with you." The blackened ruins seemed to absorb his words.

And as suddenly as she had disappeared, the girl stood before him once more. "What do you want of me?"

The alien who stood before her looked as if all the devils of all the hells of the universe pursued him, driving him to ground, stripping him of all that he was. His face was set in a mask of fury and his eyes blazed with a rage that threatened to destroy anything that stood in his way.

The Vulcan was peripherally aware of her fear and some part of him tried to bring a measure of control to his demeanor. He could ill afford to frighten her away again.

"I am looking for Daystrom," he said evenly.

"Why?"

"Does it matter?" he countered. "After what he has done here, why do you protect him?"

Her blue eyes blazed. "Protect him? He came in the night, murdering my family while they slept and burning the whole village! Protect him? I'd like to tear him apart with my bare hands!"

Spock nodded. He understood the feeling only too well. "Why did you build your settlement here, without benefit of Federation protection?" He was surprised how calmly he could speak with her, surprised even more that his fevered mind could still function, feeding him what little information he had of this planet.

The girl watched the Vulcan suspiciously, wary of his sudden control, still not quite trusting him. "As you saw, we have the ability to teleport. On our home planet, we were persecuted as witches, either enslaved or murdered. Our elders somehow got together enough money to file a Religious Rights Claim to this planet and we came here. With our ability, it wasn't hard to... borrow... several cruisers to move our people here. We were happy..." her eyes glazed over, her voice grew distant. "... happy and safe, nobody chasing us all the time, stealing our children. Safe for the first time in centuries..." Her words dwindled. Suddenly, she turned on Spock. "And you brought them here! You murdered my people as surely as if you held a weapon yourself!"

In her own fury, she fell on the Vulcan, pounding her fists repeatedly against Spock's chest.

Spock grabbed her wrists, easily pushing her away from him. His grip moved to her shoulders, and he shook her hard, breaking her concentration, halting her hysterical attack.

His frame of mind was such that he had no wish to waste precious time and mental control explaining anything to this frail human girl. But he needed her.

"Daystrom already knew of this place," he grated. "He had me brought here on a pirate vessel. I did not bring his wrath down upon you."

Spock's words of explanation seemed to settle into the girl's angered mind, calming her slightly. She studied his haggard face. "But he said it was a gift to you, that you would understand... and... pursue him..."

She moved back a step, pulling free of Spock's grip, unconsciously rubbing one shoulder. "You want him, don't you?"

"There is a matter to be settled between us."

"Captain Kirk," she stated.

Hearing the name brought the bloody memories to the fore and for a moment Spock could not speak.

She continued, still watching him carefully. "He bragged about it, how it had taken years but that he had finally had his revenge. Now, all that remained to 'finish the job' was to kill you." Her eyes opened wide in sudden understanding. "Which is why he left me alive, isn't it? To tell you what happened?"

Spock sensed there was much more she was not telling him. Why had Daystrom come here in the first place? Surely, the motive was more than trapping him and getting his petty revenge.

The girl had moved back another pace, well out of Spock's reach. Even dirty and disheveled, there was an aura about the girl, a sense of presence Spock was only now becoming aware of.

He waited quietly and finally the girl spoke. "I've been sent to fetch you. I wasn't sure I wanted to, at first."

"Sent?" Spock asked suspiciously. "By whom?"

"Not Daystrom," she replied reaching for his hand.

Spock hesitated only a moment before placing his hand in hers. There was no transporter effect, absolutely no sensation of movement, nothing. One moment they were standing in the ruins of the destroyed settlement, the next they were standing in a cavern. Spock would have said it was like stepping from one place to another, but even that sensation was denied him; it was more of a feeling that they had remained stationery, while the physical world had shifted around them.

A soft, gutteral chuckle startled Spock out of his reverie. They were facing a small, dark-haired man, twisted and horribly bent, whose only chair was of stones and whose only cushion was thick cave moss. The eyes in the gnomish face were emerald green and danced of a light born of civilization. "I am Sabal. I asked Lata to bring you here so we can talk. You see, you're not the only one Daystrom is looking for."

Spock set aside the thousand questions he had of this man, needing to ask only one. "Do you know where Daystrom is?"

The gnarled little man shook his head slowly, and Spock thought abstractly that he seemed to have no neck.

"I do not know precisely, only that he will return for he hasn't found what he came after," Sabal replied with a shrug.

"Why is he looking for you?"

"I have what he believes to be a gateway to another dimension, possibly even another time, to his way of thinking... such as it is."

Spock was startled. Whatever he had expected from the crippled alien before him, it had not been talk of time and space and gateways.

"Do you possess such knowledge?" Spock's tone echoed his disbelief. There was so little time and his minimal control over the forces of chi'Kir were rapidly dwindling. He had no wish to stand here and fantasize with a mad little cave-dweller over passageways to another universe. All he needed from him was knowledge of Daystrom's whereabouts and he would be on his way.

"Yes," Sabal answered bluntly, startling the Vulcan yet again. "But not to the degree Daystrom believes. I am from another dimension, but I came here quite by accident. My abilities extend only to myself. At that, I'm not sure I could even move myself through the gateway. Daystrom believes that with my help, he could move whole ships, an entire fleet, from one place in this universe to the other, using the gateway as an interdimensional short-cut. He is quite mad... isn't he?"

Spock nodded mutely. He imagined he could almost see the glint in Daystrom's eyes as he learned of the passageway. To be able to have an entire fleet of pirate vessels "pop-out" of empty space, and destroy the enemy. With such power, Daystrom could quite possibly set himself up as omnipotent ruler of the galaxy.

Of course that was impossible. Daystrom would not live long enough to rule anything except his small share of hell.

"How did Daystrom learn about you?"

Sabal moved to perch on a large boulder. "I have lived here among these people for many years. I sought sanctuary from my own war-ravaged reality on the other side and from those who would use my knowledge for evil purposes, just as Daystrom would. I could not let that happen.

"Many people here know of my background. One of them must have let something slip to a trader. When Daystrom arrived searching for me, Lata helped me escape. When she returned, to the settlement, Daystrom had killed everyone and left one old woman barely alive to tell her..."

"He's holding my father and brother hostage!" Lata said bitterly. "If I don't help him find Sabal, he will kill them. I am to detain you and turn you over to him as well."

She hid her face in her hands and wept. Sabal moved to her side and put a comforting arm around her.

"She is only a child, Spock. I cannot bear to let her go through any more."

Spock wanted nothing more than to confront Daystrom, his hands clenched at the thought. But a small, still-sane part of him spoke of duty to the Federation and its peoples. Daystrom must not be given access to such knowledge. He must use the time until Daystrom returned to find a way to stop him without the loss of more innocent lives. A memory of a small, gray room flashed through his mind, a room whose walls were spattered with another innocent's blood. He looked down at his hands, almost surprised not to see them bright red. Hot tears stung his eyes but he would not allow them, not now, not yet. "Control," he whispered angrily to himself. "I must maintain control."



Less than a day after the briefing, the Enterprise arrived at Star Base 6, staying only long enough to beam Sanchez and Devon aboard. Then, the Enterprise was bound for Shangri-La at Warp 7 with Starfleet's blessing and Kirk's high hopes buoying them along.



Spock paced the small cave, questioning Sabal as he and Lata ate a light meal. The girl had been able to find some provisions in the ruins. She remained sullen in her attitude toward Spock which he ignored. Sabal seemed willing to answer any questions he could.

"Why did Daystrom leave?" Spock queried.

"I believe he had word of some ships and weapons for sale at a free port. He's trying to build a fleet."

"Why was he not able to find you with his ship's sensors?"

"I have set a shield around this cave. He will not find me unless I want him to," Sabal assured him.

"Are you certain you won't eat something?" the little man asked yet again. Spock ignored the question.

"Your machine, will you show it to me?"

Sabal nodded and reached into a deep pocket in the loose, black jacket he wore. When he opened his hand, Spock saw only a piece of crystal, oblong in shape. It fit easily in the palm of Sabal's hand. He drew his thumb down the side of the object in a stroking motion and on the wall of the cave opposite him appeared a circle of green light that grew and expanded until it covered the wall completely.

Spock walked over to it, studying it closely. It was light and yet beyond the light there seemed to stretch a corridor, empty and dark.

"That is the gateway," Sabal stated.

"Why do you not simply use your machine to move to another planet? Someplace where Daystrom could not find you."

"There is something in this planet's atmosphere that allows the crystal to work. I haven't been able to determine exactly what. Actually, I haven't looked. I only wanted to escape with my life and find a safe haven. I found it here. I had no wish to go elsewhere."

"Then, even if Daystrom had possession of this crystal, he could only use it to travel between this planet and your home world," Spock conjectured.

"Yes, though he obviously believes otherwise. And it is possible that if he returned to my world with the crystal, someone there, if there is anyone left, could develop it further." Sabal stood, working the kinks out of his legs. Lata sat quietly, watching them.

"Then we still must keep it from him, no matter what the cost," Spock said implacably.



The trip to Shangri-La would take the Enterprise two days. Kirk left the bridge at the end of his watch the first day but did not go to his quarters. McCoy looked for him there and several other places to no avail. The doctor was standing outside the officer's lounge in deep thought when Sulu left the room on his way to his quarters.

"Doctor McCoy. You look lost."

"I'm not the one who's lost. It's the Captain. I've been trying to find him."

Sulu chewed his lower lip speculatively. "I don't know if I should say anything, but..."

"But what? Have you seen him or not?" asked an aggravated McCoy.

"I saw him go into Mr. Spock's quarters a few minutes ago."

"Thanks, Sulu." McCoy left immediately for the Vulcan's cabin.

The door opened on a darkened room. The only light came from the flickering firepot. Kirk sat in front of it, staring into the flames.

"Jim, what are you doing in here?"

McCoy's voice startled him and he was on his feet in a split second. "Don't you believe in knocking, Doctor?" he asked. McCoy merely stood his ground, waiting.

"To answer your question, I'm still trying to break through that damn barrier. I thought if I came here, it would help somehow."

"And did it?" McCoy knew the answer before Kirk spoke.

"No. If only we'd had more time..." The bitterness in Kirk's words worried McCoy.

"What do you mean, more time?"

"Spock was teaching me how to deepen the link between us, strengthen it so that nothing could ever break it." He turned to look at the firepot.

"The barrier is still there. At least that's something. At least he's still alive," McCoy offered.

"But in what condition? What if Daystrom has him, what if he..." Kirk stopped.

"What if he's doing to Spock what he did to you?" Kirk nodded mutely, remembered pain assaulting his senses. "All you can do is try to find him in time."

"But what if that's not enough? What if Daystrom kills him?"

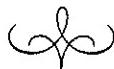
McCoy reached out and grasped Kirk's shoulder. "Then we'll face that, too. Together."

When Kirk made no response, McCoy spoke again. "Come on, Jim, let's go get some dinner. You're still not 100% and you need to keep up your strength."

"Doctor's orders?" Kirk turned to smile at him.

"If you like and if that's the only way to make you listen to me."

"Might as well. I'm sure as hell not accomplishing anything here."



Lata left the cave early the next morning to return to the settlement saying she knew where there was more food. Spock returned to his pacing of the cave. He knew precisely to the millimeter its length, breadth and height. Finally, hours later, he seemed to come to a decision. "I am returning to the settlement. Waiting here is accomplishing nothing."

"I'll go with you," Sabal offered, standing up.

"No, you must remain here behind your shield. Daystrom must have no opportunity to find you or the crystal."

"Daystrom has already found him," came the mocking voice behind him.

Spock spun around to see Daystrom at the cave entrance, Lata beside him. His henchmen stood behind them, waiting at the mouth of the cave.

The Vulcan disregarded the disruptor in Daystrom's hand and lunged toward the alien. The weapon's beam caught him and threw him to the ground, stunned.

"You promised they wouldn't be hurt," Lata screamed, hurrying to Spock's side and helping him to sit up.

"I believe you will find Dr. Daystrom to be less than honorable." Spock said in a tight voice.

"You misjudge me, Spock," Daystrom bragged. "I do keep some promises. For instance, I promised myself that Kirk and I would meet again and we did." He laughed as he watched Spock struggle to stand.

"I want that crystal." He advanced toward Sabal, hand outstretched.

"Give it to him," Lata begged. "If you do, he will release us and my father and brother too."

"Child, child," Sabal said sadly, shaking his head at her naivete.

Daystrom laughed harshly and grabbed her arm, pulling her to him. Putting his disruptor in his belt, he pulled a knife from his belt and placed it at her throat.

"Give me what I want or I'll slit her throat."

Sabal blanched and reached into his pocket, pulling out the crystal.

"That's better. Now, activate it. I want to see this doorway of yours."

Sabal glanced at Spock who still could not move and at the armed men in the cave entrance. He slowly ran his thumb down the length of the crystal. The circle of light appeared and grew large. Daystrom moved toward it eagerly, still holding the girl. Unnoticed, Sabal pointed the crystal toward the cave entrance and rubbed the opposite side. There was a rumble and with a mighty crash, the ceiling above Daystrom's men collapsed, burying them all and sealing the entrance to the cave.

"That was very foolish! I have other men who will find us within minutes. You've gained nothing but my anger! Now, give me that crystal!"

He threw the girl to the cave floor and held out his hand. He had replaced the knife with his disruptor, set to kill.

"What about my father and my brother," Lata sobbed. "They were dead before my ship left orbit," Daystrom threw at her, still advancing on Sabal.

"You lied! You lied!" she screamed, launching herself at him. Before she could reach him, the disruptor flared and Lata disappeared, her screams of agony echoing in the closed cave.

Daystrom grabbed the crystal from Sabal's hand. "Now I shall see what is on the other side of this gateway of yours."

The large dark man walked into the circle of light at the same moment Spock regained his feet. He stumbled after Daystrom. Sabal stayed him for a moment.

"His weapon will not work on the other side of the gateway. He does not know how to renew the effect. It will remain open for an hour and then close automatically. If you cannot find him and return the crystal to me, you will be trapped on that side and I on this."

Spock nodded, Sabal's words hardly penetrating the anger and rage that burned in him. He stepped into the circle and began the final pursuit of the monster named Daystrom.



When the Enterprise reached Shangri-La, there were three small unmarked cruisers in orbit around the planet. At the appearance of the mighty starship, they broke orbit and left immediately.

"Do we go after them, sir?" Chekov asked.

"Devon, scan the planet," Kirk ordered.

"Sensors show several life forms, sir," she reported. "None Vulcan."

"Are you sure?" Kirk asked, disappointment coloring his words.

Devon checked again. "Yes, sir."

"Establish orbit, Mr. Sulu. Uhura, call Doctor McCoy and a security team to the transporter. I'm going down."

Scott was waiting for him in the transporter room. "Permission to accompany you, sir."

Kirk smiled. "Granted, Mr. Scott." McCoy and a team of three security men led by Abuto arrived within moments.

"Jim, why go down there? I understand sensors didn't pick up any Vulcan signs. Maybe Spock was on one of those ships. We should be going after them," McCoy protested.

Kirk shook his head. "Whatever the sensors say, I feel Spock is down there. Maybe the link is stronger because I'm closer to him, maybe it's just a hunch but I'm going down."

"And if you're wrong?" McCoy persisted.

"I won't be. I can't be," Kirk asserted. "Now, let's go."

The transporter placed them a short distance from the source of the sensor signal. It was a small clearing surrounded by dense woods.

Abuto held a tricorder but seemed unsure as to how to proceed.

"Well, which way?" Kirk demanded.

"I... I don't know, sir," he answered, puzzled. "The signal is completely gone now."

Kirk and McCoy looked at each other. The doctor knew what the Captain was thinking: he had guessed wrong, played one hunch too many. A trap, a trick, a diversion so Daystrom could escape with Spock? Whatever it was, it now seemed certain that Daystrom and his precious prisoner were long gone from this place. McCoy saw hope die in Kirk's eyes.

Suddenly, the ground beneath them trembled and Abuto consulted the tricorder.

"That way, sir," he pointed through the trees. In a matter of minutes, they reached the cave entrance, now blocked by fallen boulders.

"Can you tell what's on the other side?" Kirk asked.

"Negative, sir. There's some sort of field in place."

"All right. Use your phasers to burn through the rock. But carefully, Abuto."

The security chief nodded and with his men, took careful aim. One by one, the rocks disappeared.

"Phasers on stun," Kirk ordered as he started through the opening, the others close behind him.

He found no Daystrom, no Spock, only one very frightened being who called himself Sabal.

"I'm Captain James Kirk of..."

"Captain Kirk? But you're dead! I mean Spock said -- and Daystrom..." the words tumbled over each other.

Kirk grabbed the front of Sabal's jacket. "Spock? You've seen him? Where? When? Where is he?"

McCoy pulled his hand away. "Easy, Jim, he's already scared to death."

Sabal pointed to the green circle on the wall and quickly told them what had happened. Kirk walked toward the gateway, McCoy, Scott and the others at his heels.

"Where do you all think you're going?" Kirk asked turning to face them.

"With you, of course," McCoy answered for all of them.

"No. You're staying here. If the gateway closes, I won't have all of you trapped as well. If we don't make it back, take Sabal to the ship and report what's happened to Starfleet."

"It all finally comes down to you and Spock, doesn't it, Jim?" McCoy asked quietly.

"And Daystrom, Bones. Don't forget Daystrom." He turned and walked into the green light.

"I won't forget, Jim. I won't forget anything." The words were a whispered promise carried on the wings of a prayer.



Down empty, winding corridors, Spock pursued Daystrom. Out into deserted, silent streets, he closed the chase. The blood pounded in his ears. Nothing penetrated the rage of chi'Kir but those few words: Pursue! Capture! Kill! Then something else reached him - fear, stark terror given off by Daystrom almost as a tangible scent. It only served to intensify and fuel Spock's anger. So close, almost there. Soon, it would be over. The barrier could be lowered and he would know peace at last.

Suddenly, a scream of agony ripped apart the curtain of silence. Spock froze in his tracks and then made for the direction from which the sound came.



Kirk emerged from the corridor into the empty streets in time to hear the scream. His blood ran cold and his heart constricted in fear. Was it Spock? Had Daystrom...? He pushed aside all conscious thought and let his reflexes carry him on toward the sound. He tried again to break the barrier in his mind, to let Spock know he was coming. But it held.



Spock turned a corner in time to hear Daystrom's death cry. The scientist was surrounded by a mob of what looked to be mutants, disfigured, ragged mockeries of people who, without uttering a sound, were clubbing Daystrom to death. When they had finished, they disappeared into the shadows between the buildings as if they had never been.

Spock moved to the spot like a robot, his mind still in the killing mode, instructing his body. His hands, so long denied their purpose, found the scientist's neck and prepared to administer tal'shaya. But there was no life to take, Daystrom was dead. It was over. He had been denied the right of chi'Kir but the end was the same. Daystrom was dead. Kirk's murder was avenged. He was suddenly tired, tired beyond caring, beyond even the simplest movement. He sat down and looked at his hands, once more covered with blood.

The magnitude of what he had been prepared to do suddenly swept over him. His hands trembled, the tremors moving to sweep over his entire body. Nausea gripped him and threatened to overwhelm him. He had killed before in defense of his own life or someone entrusted to him but never cold bloodedly, unfeelingly, guiltlessly. He was grateful the mutants had saved him from this terrible act and sickened by the gratitude. Nothing made sense, nothing was real.

A sparkle of light caught his eye and he saw the crystal next to Daystrom's body. It had been crushed into bits of glittering dust. All that remained was to lower the barrier, to allow his mind to be swept into the limitless void of death. He closed his eyes.

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Kirk rounded the corner of the blank-eyed, deserted building to see Spock sitting on the ground next to Daystrom's body. His head was lowered and his eyes were closed. Damn, too late! Spock had killed Daystrom.

At the precise moment he opened his mouth to call to Spock, he felt the barrier in his mind crumble. Spock's head lifted and his eyes met Kirk's. For a stunned moment, neither spoke. Then, Kirk ran to the still-seated Vulcan.

Kirk knelt down and took the dazed Spock by the shoulders. "Spock! Are you alright?"

The Vulcan looked at him as if he had never seen him before. Realization came as a dawning light. "Jim? You're here, alive? But you can't be..."

"But I am, my friend. Very much alive now that I know you're safe."

Spock reached a tentative hand to Kirk's face and felt the truth of what he thought he was seeing through the open link. He felt Kirk's joy and saw echoes of his own grief and disbelief. It was enough for the moment.

"We have to get back to the cave, Spock. Where is the crystal?"

"Destroyed." The Vulcan allowed Kirk to pull him to his feet.

"Come on, let's get out of here, Spock." Kirk turned and began the race back through the streets and into the corridor.

The circle of light was beginning to contract as they approached it. Kirk reached behind him and grabbed Spock's arm, pulling him and pushing him through, following immediately after.

At last, Kirk lay on his back on the cave floor, panting for breath. It had taken what little reserves of energy he had managed to regain to make that last run. He looked over to see McCoy and Scott kneeling beside Spock.

Kirk pushed himself up on one elbow. "Bones, is he all right?" McCoy came to his side.

"Seems to be."

"Help me up," Kirk asked. Looking around, he noticed Sabal was gone.

Scott answered the unasked question. "He went back through the gateway, sir."

Kirk only nodded. Later, he would have to sort everything out. For now, all that mattered was Spock. He moved to kneel beside him, searching his face for signs of recognition, even sanity.

"Spock?" he called quietly. "Look at me." The Vulcan obeyed yet again, turning pain-filled eyes to meet Kirk's. "I'm all right, Spock, and Daystrom is dead."

"I... I did not kill him," Spock whispered, unsure why it was suddenly important that Kirk know that.

"It doesn't matter. Come on, let's go home." He needed time to make some sense of what had happened, what he had almost done. There would be no going back until he had reconciled the events of the past days into some kind of logical reason.

Spock walked past the others and out the cave entrance. Kirk started after him.

"Jim," McCoy cautioned, "he said he wanted to be alone."

"I won't push, Bones. I just want him to know I'm here. Go back to the ship. I'll call you if I need you."

He followed Spock through the dense woods into a clearing. Ahead, the ground seemed to drop away. Spock moved purposefully as if he had been here before.

Kirk reached the drop-off and saw Spock descending a well-worn path down to a pink, sandy beach. He followed, careful to keep a distance away.

Spock walked to the edge of the water and stood staring across its reaches. Then, he bent over and ran his hands through the water, washing away Daystrom's blood. He could barely find the strength to stand again. Chi'Kir had drained him, mentally, emotionally, and physically. He had been prepared for death, not life.

Spock listened to the sound of the surf and let it wash over him. He tried to bring order to the chaos of his mind but could not. Jim was alive, Daystrom was dead. He knew those facts but could not seem to assimilate them.

Then, into the maelstrom of disorder that was his mind, came the soft whisper of sanity and hope.

'Let me help, Spock. Please, let me help.'

He turned and saw Kirk standing at the base of the cliff and he read the concern and love on his face.

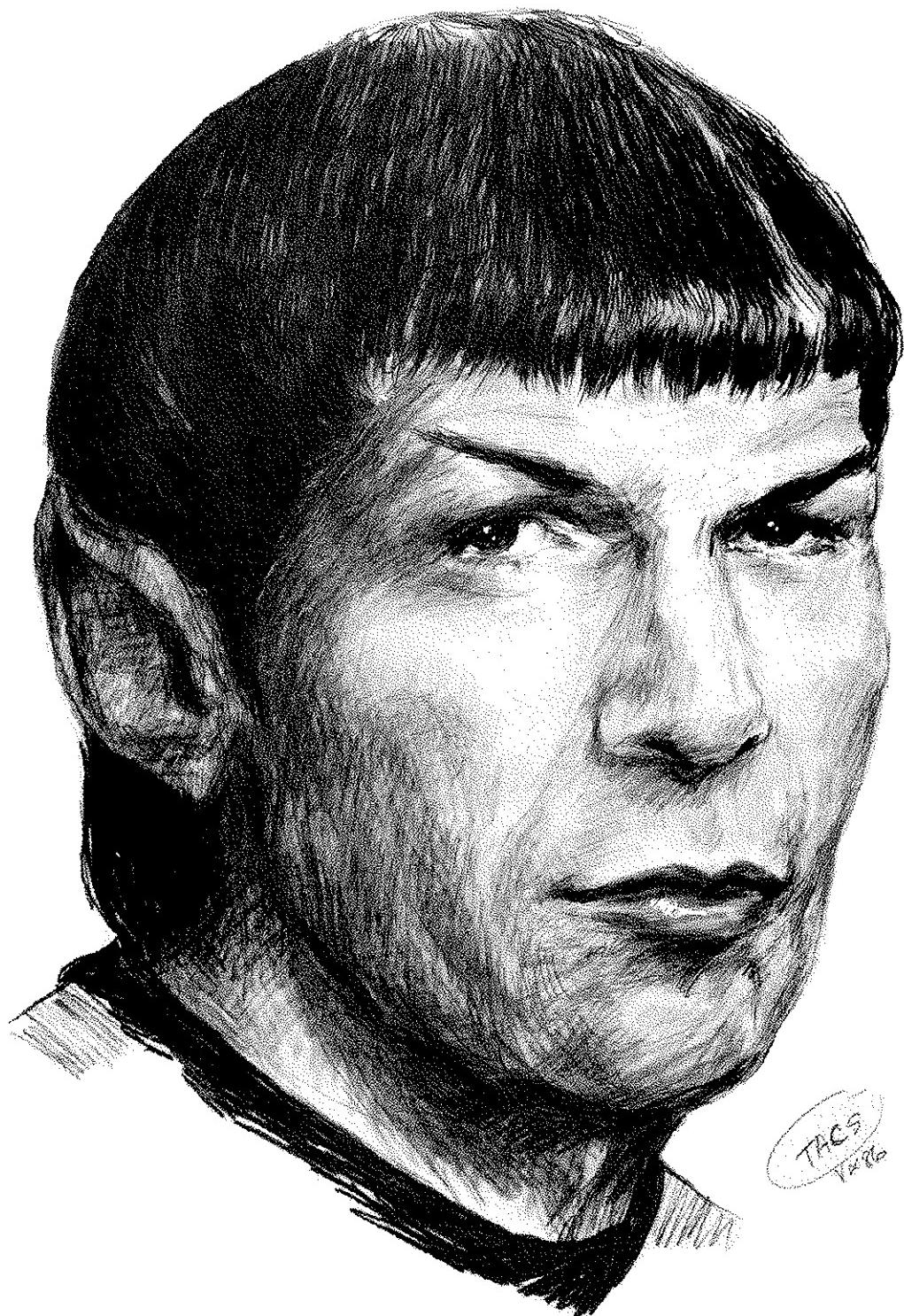
"I do not know if I can be helped." The words reached Kirk faintly, tinged with hopelessness and grief.

Kirk took several tentative steps forward and when Spock did not object, walked the rest of the distance that separated them.

"When I was brought here," Spock said, "my first thought was that I wanted you to see it. But then, I had to tell myself again that you were dead." His voice was a dull monotone.

"It is very beautiful, Spock. Probably the most beautiful beach I have ever seen," Kirk said quietly never taking his eyes from Spock. "And I am alive."

Spock nodded once. "Yes, but I do not know if I am."



Somehow, Kirk knew he had to reach him. He took Spock's hand and placed it on his own face, fingers spread, and held it there. "Feel my thoughts, Spock." The voice was firm with tones of command and Spock responded to that and reached for the link.

Don't let that bastard win now, Spock. Not when we've come so far, Kirk said firmly in the link.

There was no reply from Spock, only a welter of confused thoughts, predominated by guilt at what he had almost done this day.

Spock, do you know about the first Shangri-La?

A fictional place of total peace and contentment, came the precise if automatic reply. At least it was a response.

The people who settled this world thought they had found such a place, Spock. But peace and contentment are not a matter of place. We can only find them within ourselves. And if we truly have them, no one, not Daystrom, not anyone, can destroy that. Look within yourself, Spock. I know those things are there. Look for them again and when you've found them, I'll be waiting for you.

Kirk stepped back, breaking the link, and handed Spock a communicator. Taking his own from his belt, he signaled the ship.

"One to beam up."



McCoy was waiting for him. "Well, where is he?" the doctor demanded.

"Searching for Shangri-La, Bones. I'm going to my quarters to rest. Tell Sulu to maintain present orbit until Spock returns to the ship."

"Don't you mean if he returns?"

"He'll be back, Bones. I'm betting on it." Kirk turned and left the room.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Jim-boy," McCoy said to the closing doors.



The waves lapped lazily at the pink sands. Spock sat, arms clasped around his knees, and watched the endless waves break again and again.

He drew some measure of calm from the repetitious movement, in fact allowed it to pull him into a light, meditative state. For a short time, he needed not to think, just to be.

Somehow, he must come to terms with the side of himself he had seen this day. He knew now why it had been so difficult for Jim to deal with his dark side when he had been split by the faulty transporter. No being liked to admit to the evil parts of himself that lurked just below the level of civilization.

He had thought he knew himself so well, was in complete control. Daystrom had shown him how false his views of himself truly were.

There was the chi'Kir -- no, that was taking the easy way, blaming a force beyond his control for his actions. Someplace in all this was his answer if only he could find it.

Spock stood, watching the endless sea for another few moments. Then he signalled the ship.



Kirk threw himself on his bunk, exhausted but sure he would not sleep. The hours dragged by and still nothing. He was in a floating, almost asleep, not-quite-awake state when the door opened.

Before he could ask who it was, the deep familiar voice spoke. "May I come in, Captain?"

Kirk waved up the lights and stood quickly. Spock was back in uniform and though his face was haggard from the ordeal of the past days, he seemed composed and calm.

Kirk smiled at him. "I knew you would come back."

"I find it a source of endless fascination, Captain, how you always seem to know more about me than I know about myself," he answered with a ghost of a smile on the stern face.

"I know Daystrom almost managed to destroy us both. He taught me what real fear is, Spock. I was afraid -- afraid of death and afraid of losing you. I don't know which frightened me more." He held the Vulcan's arm in a hard grip as if to reconfirm that he was actually there.

"Daystrom made me realize how far I would be willing to go for you -- and I was afraid as well. It was never my intention to allow anyone that kind of power over me. I found myself ready, even eager, to kill to avenge you. To take another's life because I thought he had killed you." Spock watched Kirk's face intently, trying to gauge the effect his words were having.

"But it was the Warrior Pledge that drove you, Spock. I would release you from it if I knew how," Kirk offered quietly.

The Vulcan felt shock at the thought like a physical blow. "Revoking the Pledge is not the answer, Jim, for I have come to know this day that it was not chi'Kir alone which drove me but grief at the thought of losing you."

Kirk found himself unable to speak. Instead, he pulled Spock into his arms and felt the Vulcan's arms move tentatively at first, then more surely to return the embrace.

For a long moment they stood, simply enjoying the fact of each other's existence.

At last Kirk pulled back to look at Spock. "You really don't want out of the pledge?"

"No, Captain. The solution is simply to train and channel your mental capabilities so there can never again be a barrier between us in times of adversity."

Kirk released his hold on the Vulcan and moved to perch on a corner of his desk. "Then you see more adverse times ahead for us?"

"It would seem inevitable, Captain, given your predilection for rushing in where angels fear to tread."

Kirk laughed aloud at that.

"And what about Shangri-La, Spock? Will we ever find it, do you think?"

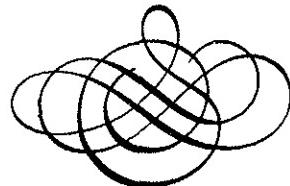
Spock studied Kirk closely for a moment. "It would seem a useless waste of valuable time to search for something we already possess, Jim."

"Agreed, Spock. Logical to a fault. Now, let's go find McCoy and get something to eat. Suddenly, I'm starved!"



*"Compassion -- that's the one thing no machine ever had. Maybe it's the one thing that keeps men ahead of them."*

-- The Ultimate Computer





# you think you've got tribbles!



By: Ginger Dawson

"I'll kill him! So help me I'll kill him for this!!! Korax!"

"Yes, Commander."

"What is the situation in engineering?"

Korax looked as if he were going to be ill. "Sir, we've lost our warp capability. Those... those... things!... have somehow managed to get into the system. We're working on getting them out now sir."

"Working on?! That's not good enough! I want those miserable furry creatures off my ship! Do you hear me?! OFF!"

"Sir," pleaded Korax, "sir there are thousands of them -- hundreds of thousands. We've blasted thousands into oblivion and it doesn't make a dent in their number! It appears the more agitated they get the more they reproduce!"

"I'll blast you into oblivion if those parasites aren't disposed of -- and soon! Come on, I'll attend to the matter personally."

Heading for the turbolift both Koloth and Korax were pulled up short, for tumbling out of the elevator lift were about several dozen hissing, spatting and none too happy tribbles.

"Let go of me you fool!" Koloth snapped at Korax who had practically jumped into his arms. "Let go of me and blast them!" he roared pointing a finger shaking with rage at the shrilling mass of multi-colored fur.

Properly chastised and embarrassed Korax swiftly drew his disruptor and fired. The only evidence that the tribbles had ever been there was the faint but distinct odor of burnt fur.

"You sniveling..." Koloth began, but before he could even get started good he was interrupted by the blaring noise of the alarm klaxon. Seizing the communications console, "This is Koloth, what's happening now?! Engineering report!"

"Sir!... we're losing life support! Those... those... things! ... there are too many of them for us! Sir we need help. Can we not contact the Empire and..."

"And tell them what?" sneered Koloth, "That one of the Empire's finest was undone by a few furry balls of fluff!" Koloth snapped the intercom off and stormed toward the elevator again snarling, "Fools! Am I surrounded by nothing but incompetent, cowardly fools?!"

Perhaps. But upon entering engineering he was most definitely surrounded by utter chaos and sheer bedlam. Tribbles and Klingons battled everywhere. Tribbles were in the airducts, all over the floor, all on the control panels, hanging on the walls and dropping from ceiling. The ceiling? How did they get on the ceiling? It was enough to make a good Klingon cry.

**"KIRK! I'll get you for this!! Do you hear?! I'LL GET YOU FOR... "**

Moral of this story: If you think you've got tribbles, just think of poor Koloth.

\*Smile\*

